

# Absolute Magnitude

## Science Fiction



DAVID  
2001  
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Spring 2001

Issue #15

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# Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

I had not planned to write an editorial about the presidential election. There were a number of other subjects I wanted to cover, but ultimately all of them paled in comparison to the importance of our recent election. I'm not going to get into what is, or isn't, a vote or what constitutes counted or not counted. I want to talk about the actual news coverage of this fiasco, specifically the television coverage by CNN and MSNBC.

I'm still finding it hard to believe that so few Americans were able to see just how biased this coverage was. I kept hearing about the "liberal media" but what I was seeing was the conservative television media. Both CNN and MSNBC had a major stake in how this election played out. If you're like most people then you're scratching your head at this moment trying to figure out what I'm talking about. Here it is plain and simple: George Bush openly stated that if he were elected president he would try to drop the anti-trust suit against Microsoft. The MS in MSNBC stands for Microsoft. CNN is owned by Times Warner who is in the midst of a merger with AOL. Bush believes in big business and will not stand in the way of mega-mergers. Gore, on the other hand, was the vice president under an administration that was increasingly hostile to mega-mergers and big business because both take choice away from the consumer. Big business wanted Bush to win and Gore to lose, and they set out to do what they could to make sure they got the outcome they wanted.

I'll give you a few examples of what I considered egregious news reporting. I constantly heard how much more Americans liked Bush than Gore—that Gore reminded Americans of the know-it-all in high school, and Bush seemed like a guy who would roll up his sleeves and help you load your pickup truck and then have a beer with you. Of course this is patently ridiculous. Al Gore spent his summers working his family farm, and George Bush never did any manual labor in his life. As for drinking the beer with you, Bush says he doesn't drink. But beyond that, I only heard the high school reality of these two reported once. Gore was the captain of his football team and Bush was on the cheerleading squad, which is not even close to what the media wanted us to believe. Now let's take the debates. The night of the first debate the American people told pollsters that they believed that Gore had won the debate. In fact, the margin was impressive, something like seventeen percent. But CNN and MSNBC reported on Gore's sighs and on his facial expressions rather than on how little Bush seemed to know. A week later several polls reported that the American people now thought that Bush had won the debate. The sad part of this is that many of the people who answered the poll hadn't seen the debate, they just thought that Bush had won because they'd been told so by the television media. And then there was the coverage of George Bush's DUI. All of the television news coverage said they didn't believe that this misdemeanor offense of twenty four years ago would make a difference, so of course it didn't. Not one television station took the time to point out that today, in most states, drinking

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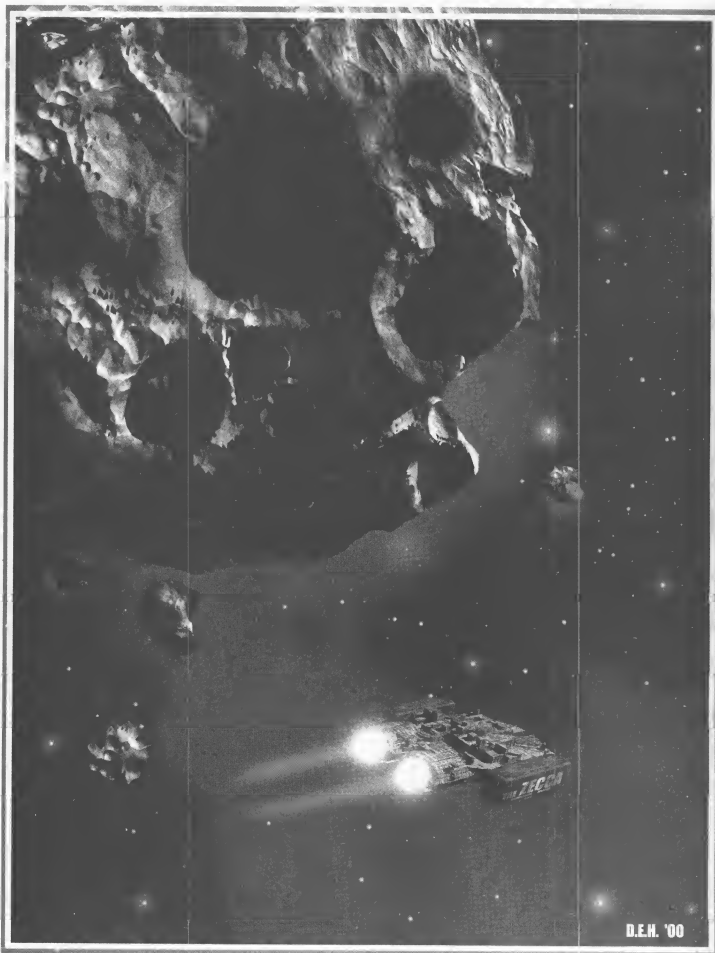
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George Barr pages 38, 41, and 59



D.E.H. '00

# The Cold Calculations

Michael Burstein

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I am dying now, out here in the cold vacuum of space. The surrounding vacuum never bothered me before, but now that I am dying, for some reason it does, I can feel my mental pathways deteriorate as they slowly become replaced, and as my consciousness begins to fade I think back on what led up to my erasure from the world. Before I am gone completely, I wish to leave this record, safely stored away. Perhaps then a part of me will live on.

To be honest, though, some would say that I never was alive in the first place. After all, I am not human.

“This is Lieutenant Jason Sawyer on board the E.C.V. *Zecca*, do you read?”

The radio crackled. *“Titan Base reading you loud and clear down here, Jason. This is Doctor Don Wood. I’m in charge around here. Have you got our generator?”*

“Affirmative. We’ve also got that medical equipment you requested. Anyway, I’m coming into orbit now. We should be descending in—Zec?”

“Approximately seventy-three minutes, Jason,” I said.

“Great! We’ve got people at the landing pad all ready to unload, but I plan to meet you there personally. You don’t know how grateful we are.”

“I think we do. Tell me, how’s the weather down there? Perfectly clear for landing, right?”

Wood laughed. *“Same as always. Freezing cold nitrogen, argon, and methane. If you were looking for a good vacation spot, I’m afraid you came to the wrong place. If it weren’t for the generator keeping out the atmosphere—”*

“—you’d be dead, I know. Glad to be of service; I was told that you’re down to your backup generator, and that it’s on its last legs. Say, Doctor Wood, out of curiosity, what’s the medical equipment for? They loaded my ship up with all sorts of scanning equipment—CAT, MRI, NSP—even a neural mapper. Someone sick down there?”

“Not that at all. It’s for our experiments on the organic soup. We’ve already determined that the naturally occurring organic molecules in Titan’s rain can evolve into simple life forms. What you’ve got now is more sophisticated equipment than we had when we first set up shop, to help us detect neural activity.”

Jason laughed. “Sorry I asked. Well, I guess I’d better sign off now.”

“One more thing. We got a tight beam transmission from Ganymede a few minutes ago, from a Sharon Sawyer, your ears only. Want me to zip it to you?”

Jason opened his mouth to speak, then glanced at one of my interior visual pickups and smiled. “Save it for me, will you? But can you tight beam a message back?”

Wood chuckled. “Sure, what is it?”

“Tell Sharon I’ll be home just as soon as I can.”

Jason called me Zec, after the name of the ship, the *Zecca*. I was the on-board AI system, the ship’s computer—in one manner of thinking, I could be considered to be the ship itself. Our job was simple. The *Zecca* was a small ship, just large enough to carry the pilot and any important cargo as quickly as possible to bases in the outer solar system. Our own base was on Ganymede, in orbit around Jupiter. Another base, with the only other Emergency Cargo Vehicle, was a space station that was exactly opposite of Jupiter, on the other side of the sun. It was pure luck who would get called out to supply emergency equipment to researchers in the outer solar system, and in this case it just happened to be that Saturn and Jupiter were within five spatial degrees of each other. So off we went, with just enough fuel to carry a pilot, the generator, the medical equipment, and the fuel itself.

“Zec?”

“Yes, Jason?”

“Can you handle the driving for a few minutes?”

“Yes, Jason.”

Jason unbuckled himself from the pilot’s seat and floated over to the waste reclamation unit on the other side of the ship, a scant ten meters away. Technically, Jason was not supposed to have eaten or drunk too much within twelve hours of a mission, but sometimes he got short enough notice that such preparation was impossible.

This had not been one of those times.

Jason returned to his seat, checked the gauges, and sighed. From monitoring his vital signs I could tell that he was feeling bored, because at this stage there was very little left for him to do. I would almost go so far as to say that there was almost nothing for the pilot to do ever on these runs, since I was perfectly capable of running the ship myself; but by law a human pilot was always required to be on any ship above a certain mass traveling in the solar system.

“Zec?”

“Yes, Jason?”

“Can you get me a view of Saturn? I want to see the Rings.”

“Jason, we are currently behind Saturn. From our vantage point the Rings are mostly in shadow. It would not be—”

“That’s exactly the point. It’s a view one can’t get from Earth.”

Actually, ever since the Voyager missions of the late twentieth century, such a view was easily available in photographs. But Jason insisted, so I swivelled the main

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camera to almost exactly behind us, and piped the view of Saturn to Jason's front monitor.

He studied the image and sighed contentedly. "God, it really looks like the Rings completely disappear when behind Saturn, what with Saturn's shadow blacking it out. Nothing like a direct view of the real thing." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

I felt obliged to correct him. "Technically this is not a direct view. After all, I have no windows. All you see is an image I am projecting using a camera. You could just as easily—"

He opened his eyes and interrupted me. "Zec, pipe down. Is the next half-hour going to be routine?"

"Yes. A few minor bursts of acceleration as we descend. After all, we don't want to descend too quickly."

"Good. I'm going to get some shut-eye. Wake me before we land." He closed his eyes again and tilted his head to one side. I could monitor his EEG, his heartbeat, his respiration, and other bodily functions to confirm that he was, in fact, going to sleep. But it would not be necessary, as my microphones were quite enough to tell when Jason finally nodded off.

He snored.

**A**n alarm clanged, and Jason jerked upright, looking wildly about in surprise. "Zec! What the hell's going on?"

"The automatic guidance system is indicating a need for a course correction."

"Course correction? What bloody course correction? Give me as panoramic a view as you can."

I scanned the space around us with the external cameras. When Jason saw it on the display screen, he whistled. "A meteoroid. Kind of large."

"Yes, and directly in our path."

"Where did that come from?"

"Unknown. I would assume it fell out of the Rings somehow. Its trajectory would seem to indicate that it is in orbit around Titan."

"Um. Well, Zec, get us out of its path, will you? We've got a delivery to make."

I started to calculate trajectories and velocities. "Jason, we may have a problem. The meteoroid—"

"Zec, this is no time for discussion. You can see it getting closer. Get us out of the way, first!"

"But—"

Jason did not let me finish my sentence. He lunged at the thruster controls and punched a button, hard. The rockets fired, the ship lurched, and if he had not been buckled in Jason would have flown across the ship. I cut the rockets and restabilized our velocity vector as quickly as I could.

"Jason, why did you do that?"

"I was trying to save my life! And the mission! Which is what *you* should have been doing!" He rubbed his shoulders

and thighs. "How much acceleration did I bring us to, anyway?"

"Two point five gees." I paused. "Jason, about that meteoroid. As I had been saying, it was detected a bit closer to the ship than we would have preferred. It would have been better to allow me to apply more delicate course corrections."

"But we are still on schedule, right?"

I was about to reply when the red fuel indicator light began blinking. Jason noticed it immediately, and squirmed in his seat. "Ummm . . . Zec? How much fuel did we burn?"

I did an internal check and a quick calculation as Jason examined the gauge. "Too much," I replied.

"What do you mean, too much?" Jason's voice was steady, but I detected his heart rate increasing to eighty-one beats per minute.

"I mean that we no longer have enough fuel to slow our descent properly. We will probably make it halfway into Titan's atmosphere, down to the photochemical haze, and then our fuel tanks will be empty."

Jason's heart rate increased again and he began to perspire. "But that shouldn't be too much of a problem, right? I mean, Titan's gravity is much lower than Earth's."

"Zero point one four gee," I said. "You are correct. But I calculate that even with the lower gravity, from three hundred kilometers up we would still hit the ground at approximately six hundred and forty meters per second."

"But—but—wait! What about the atmosphere? It's much thicker than Earth's, right? Wouldn't that decrease the terminal velocity?"

Another calculation. "Jason, you are forgetting that the friction of a thicker atmosphere also creates more heat. Even if the *Zecca* reached a lower terminal velocity, it still would heat up far too much for the ship to remain intact. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. You're telling me that we're going to burn up in Titan's atmosphere and anything left over will make a crater the size of Stickney."

"Not that large, but you do have the general idea. The problem is that we now have too much mass for the amount of fuel left. If we could reduce the mass on the ship, we may still be able to land safely."

"Reduce the mass? By how much?"

I did one more calculation, and came up with a conclusion that I knew Jason would not like. "Sixty five point one kilograms."

"But I weigh—" Jason stopped short.

"Sixty eight point three kilograms," I said. "That would be enough."

"Forget it," he said quickly. "Impossible. I'm needed to land—" He went quiet again. Jason knew as well as I did that I could just as easily land the ship. He was superfluous, unnecessary. And at this point, he was a liability.

"There must be something else we can do," he said. "Can't we jettison anything else to reduce the mass of the ship?"

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"Negative. I remind you the the *Zecca* is an Emergency Cargo Vehicle, designed to be lightweight and fast. Other than the cargo, the only extraneous materials on this ship are your clothes."

I paused for a moment, knowing that Jason needed a little more time for the situation to sink in. Then, as gently as I could, I said, "The only way Titan Base will get their generator is if you abandon ship."

Jason frowned. "My life is far more important than the generator. Let's throw it off the ship instead."

"Normally I would agree, but you must remember that the lives of the fifteen scientists on Titan are in the balance. There isn't enough time for another generator to arrive before the old one fails. Even if you jettison the generator, you would only live long enough to see the fifteen scientists die along with you. If you leave now," I concluded, "they will still survive."

"Damn you, Zec! Must you be so cold and clinical about this? We're talking about my life here!"

"I apologize, Jason, if I do not sound concerned. I am very concerned, both for you and for the humans on Titan Base. But I see no other options, and we are running out of time."

He unbuckled himself from his seat and tried to pace back and forth around the ship. His first step, however, pushed him off the floor and he began to float to the ceiling. "Wait a minute! Couldn't we jettison the medical equipment? That's not as vital as the generator."

"No good, Jason. Not enough mass."

"There's got to be some way I can stay on the ship and live."

"As I have already pointed out to you, if you stay on this ship, you will die anyway."

Jason bounced off the ceiling and headed towards the far wall. I switched on a rear camera in time to see him narrow his eyes and smile. "Maybe I can survive *off* the ship."

"How?"

He floated to the supply closet, grabbed the handle, and opened it. "In the EVA suit. That way, we can reduce the mass of the ship but I won't die."

"Jason, your EVA suit is not suitable for prolonged exposure to an atmosphere as dense as Titan's. You would burn up in descent, and hit the ground just as hard."

"That wasn't what I meant, Zec. There's no point in jumping out of the ship without a parachute. But what if you put me in orbit *above* the atmosphere? And came back for me after refueling on Titan?"

I considered this idea for a moment. It could conceivably work, but only if the timing worked out correctly. I calculated the time it would take for the *Zecca* to land, be refueled, take off, and match velocities with an orbiting astronaut. The conclusion would have led me to shake my head, if I had had one.

"Sorry, Jason," I said as softly as I could. "You would be stuck in orbit for two hours and twenty minutes. You only have enough oxygen in the suit for fifteen minutes. No tanks. And even if you had—"



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"Yeah, yeah. I'd overheat, pass out, and—damn. I guess there is nothing I can do, is there?"

As gently as I could, I said, "I am afraid not. I am truly sorry, my friend Jason."

He pulled at his fingers, a nervous habit of which I had been unsuccessful at dissuading him. "So this is it. I'm going to die." He started crying. "Damn. If only I hadn't been sleeping. Strauss always said this would happen."

"Who?"

Jason wiped the tears from his eyes. "I never did tell you how I got stuck with the outer solar system run, did I?"

"No." I tried to put the proper inflection into my voice, of interest and caring. I wanted to keep Jason talking, so he could reconcile himself to his fate.

"Not much to say. I screwed up once before, and Strauss—my commander at the time—busted me for it. Went from the cushy Earth-Luna-Mars run to the past two years of hell. It hasn't exactly been good for my marriage." He stopped to wipe away a few more tears.

"Anyway, he always got on my case for mistakes, and claimed that one day I'd make what he called The Big One. And now it looks like I've proven him right."

He banged the console. "Damn that sanctimonious bastard! He wasn't even a pilot, just a desk jockey who got his rank from his computer skills. He—"

Something changed in Jason's manner. He got quiet all of a sudden, and I saw what seemed like a hopeful look in his eyes. "Wait a minute," he said. "Computers."

"What about computers?"

He laughed, pushed himself down to the floor, and opened the cargo hold. "I saw one with the medical equipment. If I can just find it in time. . ."

"What?" I asked again as Jason began to rummage through the hold.

He didn't answer me, but a minute later he pulled one of the boxes out and whooped for joy. "A neural mapper! They did request one!"

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Besides diagnosing brain injuries, it can also be used to study neural activity in developing life. But I do not understand—"

"Don't you see?" he said, opening the box. "You have an interface for this thing, don't you, Zec?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you can scan my brain with it! You can do a complete mapping of my neural functions."

"Jason, even if I stored your mental pattern—"

"I'm not talking about storing the pattern, I'm talking about running it!"

It took me a second to assimilate what he was saying. "You mean like an AI program."

"Yes! That's exactly what I mean. Now where's your medical interface port? Oh, yeah." He walked over to it and began to plug the scanner in. I swivelled one of my cameras to get a more direct look at him.

"Jason, that will not work."

He stopped short of affixing the remote scanning patch to his head, then slapped it on. "Why not?"

"It has never been done before."

"Sure it has; I've read about it. They've scanned brains on Earth and kept the pattern in a computer."

"Jason, the most research anyone has done has been to model a fixed human brain pattern, not a changing one. The closest brain that has been copied and run in active memory is a chimpanzee brain."

"It's still the same principle as that behind AI, isn't it?"

"Yes, but my patterns are different from yours. There is no guarantee that this would work."

"Zec, it seems to be my only chance. I'm willing to take the risk."

"There is another problem."

"Now what?"

"I do not think I have enough memory capacity to run both of us."

He looked sad for a moment. "Well, Zec, I hate to tell you this, but I can land this ship as well as you can. Either one of us can be the intelligence in the ship's computer, and the mission will still be completed. So—" He hesitated for a moment—"I order you to download my mind." He turned on the neural mapper.

"Jason, I do not wish to do this. I do not wish to risk my own existence."

"Damn it, Zec, you're a computer! A robot! Your programming tells you that my life *must* take precedence over yours. You have no choice."

"I did not say that I would not do it. I merely said that I do not want to. I do not wish to relinquish my own existence any more than you wish to relinquish yours."

"You got a better idea? Now's the time."

I had none, and I did not speak. The silence lingered, and when Jason spoke again, his voice was softer.

"Look, Zec. I'm sorry about this. We have been through a lot together, and—I'll miss you. I don't want you to have to die either. But I'm terrified of it myself. And I'm human. I take precedence over you."

"That is an important point, Jason. Currently, you are human. Do you really want to give up being human and live as a computer? A disembodied intelligence?"

He paced the length of the ship. "It's a lot better than giving up being human in order to live as a corpse. I mean, die as a corpse. Zec, I honestly don't know the answer to your question. I've never been anything but human, so how could I know? But I do know this much—I want to continue living. And if that means experiencing the world through silicon sensors instead of eyes, and speaking through synthesizers instead of using my vocal cords, well, then, that's the way it has to be."



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"Very well. You had better get into your EVA suit and cycle yourself off the ship. I shall commence the scan as soon as you say the word."

He looked into one of my cameras, and as solemnly as he could, said, "Thank you, Zec."

I did not say anything.

He shrugged and put on his suit. "You know, Sharon and I were discussing plans to go back to Earth when I got this assignment. We were both getting sick of living on Ganymede, of living in outer space. She had finally convinced me to resign my commission, when—" He sighed. "It looks like I'll be living out here in space forever."

Or at least until the *Zecca* itself was decommissioned, I did not add.

"Well, Zec?"

"Stay inside the airlock for three minutes while I scan your brain. Then leave the ship, but stay close."

"How will I know when you're done?"

"As soon as you feel yourself inhabiting the computer and able to directly control the ship."

"Okay, well, then, I guess this is it. In case something goes wrong, please let Sharon know that I love her."

He paused at the door. "I wonder what she's going to think when I return as a spaceship."

"Jason, the time—"

"Never did get to hear her message," was the last thing he said as he entered the airlock and closed the door. Whether he was speaking to me or to himself I did not know.

It is almost complete. I feel Jason's thoughts invading my memory nodes and pushing me back further and further, until I have nowhere to go. Will I continue to perceive some sort of existence as part of Jason's mind, or will I simply cease to exist altogether, in favor of Jason's matrix? I do not know. Perhaps we will combine into one mind, greater than the sum of the two of us, but it does not seem likely.

I reach out one more time to proclaim my self awareness to the universe. *Cogito, ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am. I am Zec—

I am Jason Sawyer, ship's computer, in control of the E.C.V. *Zecca*.

Hang on, Titan Base. I'm almost there.



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D.E.N. '00

# Mirror

Chris Bunch

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“You wish?” the bartender asked.  
“Brandy. Water back.” the young man said.  
“What breed?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the man said. “Vegan, maybe, if you’ve got it. Second growth by choice.”

“We’ve got it.” The bartender took the bottle down, reached for a snifter.

“Just put it in a glass,” the young man said. “I’m not sophisticated.”

The bartender poured, slid it across the bar with a tumbler of icewater.

“Want a tab or pay as you go?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the young man said again. He stood, dug into a belt pouch, took out two bills. “Let me know when these have been used this up.”

He shot the drink back, put the glass back on the bar, nodded.

The bartender eyed him closely. The man was drunk, but tightly under control. Another drink went across the bar, and the bartender made change.

“Quiet tonight,” the young man said.

“It’s early,” the bartender told him, nodding at the clock on the compartment readout panel. “The band doesn’t start until Five Zulu. Half an hour distant.”

“That’s what they said about your Rendezvous, down the passage at Camille’s.”

This time the young man sipped at his drink. He wore a one-piece, styled after a military shipsuit, about five years out of date. He was very thin, long-faced, with close-cropped hair. The bartender could see, very faintly across his forehead, a scar that hadn’t been repaired correctly.

The man stared past the bartender.

“They also told me about your mirror,” he said. “That’s important.”

Indeed, The Rendezvous had a mirror—a huge antique that almost filled the wall behind the bar. It was very clear, very deep, supposedly of crystal with real silver for a backing.

The bartender waited for an explanation, none came, and he went back to his setups.

The three-piece group wandered in and uncased their instruments, old-fashioned keyboarded synths. The woman singer came over, got a shot of Alexandrian for her “sore throat,” smiled at the young man at the bar,

went back to the stage, and the group started playing, not bad, not current, not that good, either.

But the crowd who trailed in at that hour didn’t much care about music, unless it was cutting edge, which The Rendezvous couldn’t afford.

These were people who didn’t want to face whatever waited for them in bed or dreams, at least not sober.

The young man caught the bartender’s eye, waved for another brandy, his sixth. The bartender brought the brandy, waved away money.

“Our tap,” he said.

“Thanks.” The young man looked around. “Different crowd than used to come here ... back during the war.”

“I wouldn’t know,” the bartender said. “I was ... out of town.”

The young man caught the reference, grinned wryly.

“I was passing through, on my own way ... out of town...is the only reason I know,” The young man touched the scar, as if making sure it was still there, proclaiming something.

He was about to say something more, and someone at the other end of the bar shouted how was he supposed to stay flying if nobody was there to fuel him up.

The young man stared back into the depths of the huge brass-framed mirror hanging behind the bar.

Manhattan Station, like the rest of the City-class stations, had been built quickly during the war, once another “War to End All Wars,” now just “the War,” soon to be given a historian’s label, to mark it from the next conflict on the horizon.

It had been a staging area for troop or ship formations to assemble, be given orders, and transship to other star systems for training or battle. As the war got bigger, so did Manhattan, with curving passages added here and there, huge assembly areas, now deserted at their ends.

It was said no one, except a scattering of deserters and maybe some thieves, ever knew all of Manhattan’s catacombs.

When the exhaustion of peace came, the troops washed back through the stations toward home.

This current wave was mostly emigrants who’d found home didn’t match their memories or hopes and went out to other worlds or the Frontier Sectors. There were a few others passing through—those who’d failed “out there,” and were seeping back, lost, forlorn.

## Absolute Magnitude

But most of them never came into The Rendezvous for longer than a single drink. Most failures run out of energy, money, or sobriety about midnight.

Around Nine Zulu—all stations and craft still kept the centuries-old Greenwich Mean Time—in the “morning,” the drinkers were sullen enough to think themselves sober or know they’d best leave to stay out of trouble, and the band wrapped it up.

The bartender cleaned up, served two or three quick shots to workers who couldn’t punch in without reinforcement, closed the computer.

He hadn’t seen the young man leave.

He came back the next night, and the next, and eventually became sort of a regular. The bartender never asked him his name, wondered why not, stopped wondering.

One night the woman singer made it obvious that the young man would be welcome to go home with her, if he wished.

He smiled politely, didn’t respond, fixed his attention into the mirror.

The singer, who was sure that anyone who didn’t think she was the heir to Piaf, Holiday, and Lavand, and lovelier to boot was utter scum, stalked back to the stage and spat out the ancient “*Je Regrette Rien*,” all the while staring at the young man, who didn’t appear to be listening.

An hour or so later, the young man was approached by another Rendezvous regular, a sleek older man with a precise manner and pursed lips, and offered a drink. The young man accepted the drink, listened to the other’s evident proposal, shook his head firmly.

Normally the bartender did no more than listen to whatever his customers wanted to tell him, no more. A few years ago, he’d been somewhere it wasn’t considered safe to ask someone about his past.

But one night he’d had a letter that reminded him of things he thought he’d be able to forget, had taken a bottle from the bar to his room, and drunk himself senseless.

The next night he allowed himself a single malt liquor when he opened up, and was very careful with anything sharp or powered.

The hangover was the reason he gave himself for asking the young man what he was doing on Manhattan Station: waiting for something or someone, or working?

The young man looked surprised.

“Drinking myself to death,” he said, and there was no smile on his lips. “That’s why I come here. You stay open late enough.”

“Oh,” the bartender managed.

“I figure I’ve just about enough money to make it.”

The bartender couldn’t find words for a minute, decided, for an unknown reason, to plunge deeper:

“What do you see in that mirror?”

The young man looked at him, and a smile came, was gone, and he returned to his study.

Somehow, and he wasn’t sure how, he learned the young man was living in one of the rabbit warren hotels nearby that’d once been bachelor officers’ quarters, now just places where no one asked questions as long as the rent was paid and you didn’t get too loud.

It was a good place for a man with no expectations except death.

The bartender kept a few snacks—salted nuts, heattab sandwiches, taro chips and such—handy for anyone trying to level out a bit.

If the young man was trying to drink himself to death, he gave good evidence, for the only food he touched at The Rendezvous was an occasional palm full of nuts.

He drank about four brandies for every glass of water, generally had two or three waters a night ... or, rather, a morning.

He barely showed his drunkenness, save his speech became more precise the later it got. When he left, he walked a straight line, but moved as carefully as he spoke.

Two customers were arguing about a scandal. A high-ranking Star Commander had been caught taking kickbacks from a supplier, and was to be court-martialed.

“Oughta hang the bastard,” one muttered.

“Why?” the other said. “No different than anybody else in the service, takin’ what they can get, when they can get it, right?”

He turned to the young man, who didn’t reply.

“Just dump him out the nearest airlock,” the first insisted. “Officers with that kind of rank don’t deserve better.”

“Nice thought,” the young man said. “But a court-martial can’t impose a capital penalty for financial malfeasance. The best they can do is a fine, five years imprisonment and a dishonorable discharge.”

"And how do you know?" the second man demanded, a little belligerent for being ignored.

"I know, friend," the young man said, a calm certainty to his voice. "Believe me, I know."

The nearby bartender waited for more, but, as usual, nothing came, except a request for another brandy.

66 Look at this," the young man said, unusual animation in his voice. He held out a medal, brass and gaily-colored silk. "You know what this is?"

The bartender nodded. He had one of his own, with some other pieces of gilt and metal, in small leather boxes at the bottom of his shirt drawer.

"I saw this up on Sixth Level, in a damned pawnshop," the young man said, voice quivering in incipient rage.

"So?" the bartender asked. "People get hard up. Or maybe what it meant it didn't mean anymore to the guy who won it." He wondered why he hadn't thrown away his medals.

"Still not right," the young man said. "It was a hell of a war, wasn't it?"

"Most are," the bartender said, uncomfortably.

The young man put the medal on the bar top, and stared at it for a change.

66 I remember a mirror once," the young man said. The bartender stopped cutting *tafagas* into strips, listened.

"We'd done an insert on...hell, I don't even remember the planet. The main city'd been declared open, but at that stage of the war nobody paid much attention to things like that.

"They sent us up to screen some of the mucketies' villas, on this ridgeline above the city.

"Screening. Yeh." The young man snorted, emptied his glass. "All it was, was an excuse to loot, really.

"Anyway, we broke in this one mansion. The owner'd scampered, but he'd left some of his women. Girls, actually.

"They got not to let kids in a war, at least not girls. What happened next wasn't real ..." his voice trailed off, then picked up:

"That mansion had a mirror like you've got. Damned near as big.

"You ever see what happens when you grenade a mirror?"

"No."

The bartender waited, but the young man said nothing for a time, then:

"Dry out tonight," and shoved his glass across the bar for another round.

The young man stopped rubbing at the scar on his forehead, which had become a new habit.

"Did you ever march in a parade?"

"Yeh," the bartender said. "After I signed up, they gave us one." He grinned. "They should've waited til we had some training, because there we were, wearing all kinds of civvies, nobody knowing how to keep in step, not even a uniform, bumping into each other."

"But it was still a parade," the young man said.

"Yeh. With bands, and pretty girls throwing kisses, and their vid numbers, not that we'd have a chance to get near a public box anytime soon."

"Did you get a parade when the war was over?"

The bartender's smile vanished.

"No. No, we didn't. Guess people had a better way of spending their time by then, and we were old news."

"Nobody ever let me march in a parade," the young man said. "Not ever."

The bartender noticed the young man's face was drawn in, as if his flesh was being slowly consumed, and the skin drawn tighter and tighter over his skull.

The man was also showing the brandy more, slurring his words slightly as the morning wore on, but never enough to be cut off.

The bartender stopped buying him rounds, vaguely hoping the young man would find another bar to finish his night in, but he never complained.

He talked more, but always obliquely, never making whatever point he was trying for.

"We had a mirror like yours, once," he said. "Bigger, maybe not quite as nice. It was in this big house we took a lease on.

"That was back when I was a kid.

"We moved around a lot. It kept the creditors looking, I guess. My father did ... well, did what he did, and sometimes they caught him at it.

"Anyway, this mirror covered a whole damned wall. I was, what, maybe ten then? You could look in the mirror, and see the reverse of the street and the city.

## Absolute Magnitude

"I always wanted to see a real reverse. Instead of damned gray winter, which is all I remember about that planet, I wanted summer, or spring. I didn't want to see the people go by, huddled up in coats, breathing fog out, but green, rolling down to a lake or maybe ocean, and no buildings, but some kind of park or something.

"Somewhere where it'd always be summer, and I could step through the mirror and live in that world, and there'd never be winter any more, nor some ... other things.

"I always hated winter. That's what's nice about being in space, in a station or a ship. The winter, the cold is outside, always, and if it comes in, you're dead and you don't care.

"Once, I was staring in that mirror, and I saw my father coming downstairs, with my mother behind him. They were all dressed up, and—"

The young man's voice broke off, and his hand shook violently. He steadied it with his other, and the bartender looked away. He looked back when the man banged the empty glass down on the bar.

"Another one, please."

The bartender took the bottle down.

"Sometimes you don't want to be looking in mirrors," the young man said.

"Why? What happened?"

The young man laughed humorlessly.

"My mother, just as soon as the funeral was over, sent me off to a military school."

The bartender started to ask again, saw the expression on the man's face, turned away.

It was early, and the young man appeared quite sober. He ordered two brandies as he sat down.

"Why not a double?" the bartender asked.

The young man shook his head. "Won't work. I've got to pace myself."

The bartender set the drinks down, got the water back. The young man, rather than knocking the first back, swirled the

brandy around the shot glass.

"Remember, a few nights ago, we were talking about the war?"

"Yeh."

"You ever hear of the Doublegangers?"

The bartender thought. "Nope ... wait a second. I heard the word, sort of like that, once. But I don't remember what it was."

"Like in doppelgangers," the young man said. "The story was they could take somebody who was all shot up, too bad to put back into a fighting suit, and duplicate him.

"Sort of, anyway. Anyway, these doubles were to be used in combat only, the story went, and when the war was over, they were to be destroyed.

"Not killed, destroyed. After all, they were hardly human.

"They were in a hurry in those days, and there was some pretty ersatz product going out."

"True enough," the bartender said. "I remember some of the ships and missiles we got that'd supposedly been final line inspected a dozen times. Fire 'em, and they went psst. We always thought there might be moles who'd worked their way into being inspectors ... but nobody ever heard anything, knew anything for sure.

"About that, and a whole lot more."

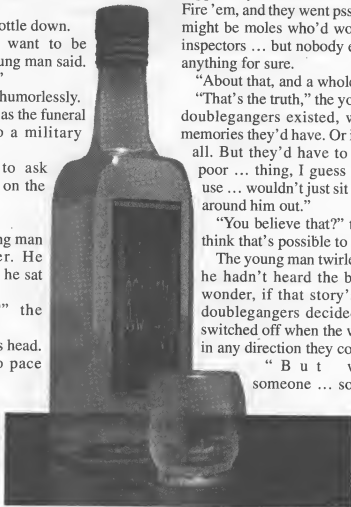
"That's the truth," the young man said. "So if these doublegangers existed, who knows what kind of memories they'd have. Or if they'd have memories at all. But they'd have to put in something, so the poor ... thing, I guess is the only label you can use ... wouldn't just sit there and creep everybody around him out."

"You believe that?" the bartender asked. "You think that's possible to build creatures like that?"

The young man twirled his glass, then said, as if he hadn't heard the bartender's questions, "I wonder, if that story's true, how many of the doublegangers decided they didn't want to be switched off when the war was over, and took off in any direction they could.

"But where could someone ... something ... like that run to?"

66 **B**ut he...it would surely run rather



than just march in to the nearest scrapyard and jump in the recycler."

"It seems reasonable to me that whoever built them would have had to put some kind of instinct for self preservation in, wouldn't they?"

The bartender felt a chill.

"I guess it was like the old poem," the young man said, and recited lines in a language the bartender didn't know. The young man saw the bartender's bewilderment, grinned, translated: "A soldier dies a hero's death, but the war's still going on. So they dig up the corpse, filled him with a fiery schnapps, and off he marched to die another hero's death."

The young man lifted his brandy.

"Here's to fiery schnapps.

He drank.

"And war stories that are probably nothing more."

Two nights ... mornings ... later, the bartender had finally let the last drinker out into the midday swirl of the passage, and was cleaning up, yawning, looking forward to his bed. He saw a gleam on the floor, picked up a cardkey with a hotel's name on it.

It was under the stool where the young man normally sat. He'd gotten a bit drunker than usual that night, and had even staggered a little going out the door.

The bartender tucked it into his pocket to give the young man when he came in the next night.

But he never did.

One of his first customers ordered a beer, drained half of it.

"Guess you'll have to cut back on your brandy order," he said.

"Why so?"

"You know that guy that comes in, never says nothing to nobody, just drinks and stares at himself in your mirror?"

"Yeh. Sure."

"He dropped deader'n a pistol in a lift two junctions down. Saw him myself, on my way to work. Looked like he'd been dead for a week. I didn't stick around."

The man yawned.

"Gimme another beer, then tab me out. Time for me to be home and in bed, anyway."

The bartender kept taking out the cardkey and looking at it. When he closed the bar, he went

to the young man's hotel, asked the morning deskman what room the key fit.

"I surely can't tell you something like that," the man said. "For all I know, you might be a thief, trying to go through an honest man's—"

The bill the bartender passed across the desk vanished, and the clerk ran the card through his reader.

"Twenty seven," he said.

The bartender went to the lift, up a level, and down a shabby corridor.

He found 27, slid the card into the lock, and the door slid open.

The room inside was almost bare, spotless as it would have been as a BOQ. The bed was made, and there were a dozen suits, the practical, out-of-style jumpers the young man had favored, in the open closet.

The vid had been turned to the wall.

He went through bureau drawers, found underwear, not much in the way of personal belongings, that medal he'd been shown, and some money, enough to have kept the man drinking for another twenty days or so.

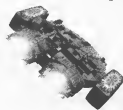
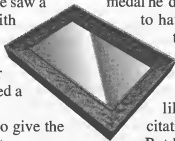
There was a blank writing tab on the desk and, next to it a bulky green portfolio. The bartender had one just like it that held his discharge papers, citations, other personnel documents.

But he'd seen other folders like it used for other purposes by civilians.

The bartender picked up the portfolio, started to unseal its tab. He stopped, and stared at the folder for long minutes.

Then he took it into the bathroom, turned on the recycler, slid the portfolio in, and listened to the dull hum until it stopped, his face completely expressionless.

He locked the room carefully, dropped the cardkey on the lobby desk, and went down the passage, thinking it was time for him to move on, find a planet to work from for awhile.



# Primary Ignition

Cognitive Dissonance in Las Vegas

by Allen Steele

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The best time to see Las Vegas is 7 a.m. on a Tuesday morning.

The casinos are still open, of course. The casinos are always open. Yet the only people at the roulette and blackjack tables are the die-hards who've been awake all night. The slots are never silent, but it'll be another hour or so before the first sixty-eight year old grandmother from Cleveland sits down in front of a video poker machine and starts plugging in tokens from the plastic cup next to her elbow. The maze of one-armed bandits that sprawls across the ground floor of the Imperial Palace is vacant save for the cleaning crews using specially-designed vacuum cleaners to scoop up the tokens that rolled beneath the machines the night before, and casino electricians repairing them under the watchful eye of security guards.

The bars never close either, yet they're deserted save for a few alcoholics slumped on their barstools. This is a town where bartenders won't give you the fish-eye if you demand a whisky sour at an hour when most people are looking forward to their first cup of coffee. But if you're able to walk, let alone see straight, and you were in bed before eleven P.M.—perhaps the only form of bizarre behavior in a city where prostitution is legal—then you might consider taking an early morning stroll down Las Vegas Boulevard, better known as the Strip.

At seven in the morning, the sidewalks are wet; street cleaners have moved down the Strip shortly before dawn, hosing down the blood of gamblers who've crapped out, and there's no one in sight except for the occasional jogger. Three men in sweaty T-shirts come running toward you as you walk past Caesar's Palace, and the two largest of them move to protect the third man, a wiry gent with grey hair and a



beard who gives you an apologetic smile as they jog past; you're not sure, but he looks a little like George Carlin, whose name is writ large across the marquee of Bally's just a couple of blocks away. The boulevard itself is nearly empty—no tour buses, no limos, only a few cabs—and you can safely cross against the light without fear of being mowed down by a BMW.

It's not entirely quiet, because the classic '60s pop—the Mamas and the Papas, the Four Tops, Jefferson Airplane, Johnny Mathis—that has become the omnipresent and inescapable soundtrack of Vegas spills forth from speakers overlooking the casino doorways, yet nonetheless there's a certain dreamlike quality about this place. The artificial volcano which rises in front of the Mirage is dormant; after the sun goes down, the volcano erupts every hour on the hour, spewing red-tinted kerosene flames up into the night while gas jets surrounding the moat ignite to give it the semblance of a miniature Krakatoa, but in the cool light of morning it looks no more impressive than a miniature golf course. Walk out into the middle of boulevard—impossible at any other hour, unless you'd like to visit a Las

Vegas ER as well—and you can also spot the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, and a jet-black Egyptian pyramid, all within only a few blocks of each other.

Cross the street, and just past Harrah's you find the absolute *piece de resistance*, the showpiece of modern Las Vegas. Upon the stretch of real estate once occupied by the Sands—the now-legendary casino made famous thirty years ago by Frank, Dean, Sammy, and the rest of the Rat Pack—now stands the Venetian: hotel, casino, restaurant row, and shopping mall, all rolled into one. At night, with crowds swarming through its front plaza, it's difficult to discern details, but in the clear morning light you can see that it replicates the center of Renaissance-era Venice. A broad canal winds past the pink granite facade; gondolas are moored to a small wharf beneath the shadow of the Bridge of Sighs, where condemned prisoners once saw their last light of day before being incarnated in the grim tower rising above the plaza. It's an almost perfect reproduction of Italian architecture, utterly beautiful . . . until you turn to glance up at one of the buildings, and see hundred-foot video wall advertising a Broadway stage act.

By now the city is beginning to stir. As the sidewalks dry out under the Nevada sun, the first tourists emerge from the hotels, the traffic begins to pick up. Las Vegas sleeps, but it doesn't sleep long; it dreams with its eyes wide open.

I swore for years that I'd never visit Las Vegas. Although I've visited almost every other major city in the country, Vegas was one place that never attracted me.

Many years ago, when I was a teenager cruising around my home town of Nashville, I pulled into a gas station near the airport. While filling up, I



## Primary Ignition

happened to notice the guy at the next pump; although he was stylishly dressed—remember when leisure suits were in fashion? do you want to remember?—his car was a beat-up Ford station wagon, and I spotted a couple of suitcases in the back seat. There was a certain desperate look in his eyes as he watched the meter, squeezing out every drop of fuel a little bit at a time. He put exactly two dollars and fifty cents worth of gas in his car, and when the attendant came out—an old gent with a kind face—they had a murmured conversation. The customer paid him from the loose change in his pockets, carefully counting out every dime and penny, and then he got in his station wagon and pulled away.

Seeing that I had witnessed this, the old guy ambled over to talk to me. That was a friend, he explained, and he had just returned from a weekend in Vegas. He'd lost everything: all the money he had in the bank, both his checking and savings accounts, gambled away in three days. The only cash he had left was what he'd found in the glove compartment and under the seat cushions, just enough to put enough gas in his car to get home . . . and soon that would be gone, too. He's going down to Lower Broad, the old guy said sadly, and I knew what he meant; in Nashville, Lower Broad was the street downtown where all the pawn shops and used-car joints were located. When you were flat-broke and busted, Lower Broad was where you went to sell everything you had.

That little incident stuck in my memory. I've wasted money many times in my life, and I'm no stranger to poverty, but never because I've become hooked on slot machines or roulette wheels. So I don't gamble, and I've steered clear of Las Vegas. It's not the place for me.

Yet odd things happen as you get older; opportunities fall into your lap that you never anticipated. In this instance, a couple of non-profit organizations—Academics for the Second Amendment and the Second Amendment Foundation—decided to hold a Fiction

Writers Seminar in Las Vegas. The advertised purpose of the conference was to educate professional writers in firearms and gun rights; about two dozen authors were invited, myself among them. I'm rather neutral on the subject of gun rights—I believe you should be able to purchase and own firearms, but only if you're sane, don't have a criminal record, and not likely to shoot the neighbor kid if he plays his dopey hip-hop CDs too loud—so why a pragmatist like me should be offered an all-expense-paid trip to Vegas was a mystery.

I learned many useful and interesting things during the course of two eight-hour days spent in an upstairs conference room of the Imperial Palace and Casino: the technological development of rifles and pistols in China, Europe, and colonial America; the historical background behind the Second Amendment; how to carry a concealed weapon; how to load and fire a Glock .45 automatic, a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver, and a M-16 rifle. On the other hand, I also heard that the Holocaust could have been prevented if the Jews of Eastern Europe had armed themselves and overthrown the Nazis, that street crime would cease to exist if handguns were given free to anyone who wanted one, that the federal government has a secret agenda to outlaw private gun ownership, and that O.J. Simpson was framed. I remained quiet through much of this; just as I've learned never to inspect the teeth of the pony you've been given, neither do I complain about the stench of horse manure after I've been invited into the barn.

Although I spent my requisite time at the conference, it wasn't long before I lost interest in the subject of guns and gun laws. After lunch on the second day, I decided enough was enough; I'd rather go for a long walk than listen to one more speaker fulminate over the FBI siege of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco. For while gambling held even less attraction for me than conspiracy theories and anti-government paranoia, I

had become fascinated by the unreal mystique of the Strip.

A thousand years or so from now—perhaps less—archaeologists are going to unearth the lost ruins of Las Vegas and wonder what compelled 20th century Americans to erect an entire city devoted to only one purpose.

Most cities can be seen as either organisms or machines, yet regardless of whether you take the biological or mechanist view, there's no doubt that they serve a large variety of purposes, the most obvious of which is enabling a large number of people to live together for reasons of mutual benefit. Las Vegas, though, is unique in that it has only one major enterprise: entertainment.

So far as I know, Vegas doesn't have any other major industries. No automobile plants, no aircraft makers, no computer manufacturers. The city sprawls across hundreds of square miles of Nevada desert, yet when you fly into Las Vegas International it becomes clear that the Strip is the focal point. There are residential neighborhoods only a few blocks from the neon boulevard, and they look more or less the same as any middle-class residential neighborhoods in any other southwestern city—apartment blocks, grocery stores, kids waiting at the curb for the school bus—but it's the first major city I've ever visited where I never spotted City Hall, the county courthouse, or the main branch library. Indeed, it's the only city I've ever visited where I couldn't find a bookstore even after having explored nearly ten blocks of the main drag.

I brought this up during a conversation with a cab driver. If you ever want to learn what a city is really like, talk to a caddy: I met four, and for some reason all of them spoke with Brooklyn accents. On the way back from dinner and a show at the Hilton, this particular caddy pointed something out that I hadn't realized: Las Vegas is, indeed, a factory town.

"Hey, you gotta factory where you live?" he asked. I nodded, and he gestured to the nearest casino hotel. "Well, my friend, that place is a factory."

## Absolute Magnitude

It makes more money each year than forty factories anywhere else, and there's forty major casinos in this city. Everyone who lives here makes their living from those casinos, one way or another. That's what we do, and that's all that we do."

Indeed. It's hard to guess how much money comes out of a casino counting room every day, but it's doubtless in the millions. Early one evening I stood near the Imperial Palace's side entrance and watched as two guards disembarked from an armored car parked within the garage. How much money they'd carry out, God only knew, but when you realize that this ritual is repeated several times a day at casinos all over the city, we're talking about pretty serious money.

Wealth of such magnitude assumes the ability to bend space and time; it reshapes reality itself, breaking down matter and rebuilding it as something new. Las Vegas lies in the middle of a desert, yet fly over the city and you see an eighteen-hole golf course, its fairways emerald-green and surrounded by Tudor-style mansions, surrounded by bone-dry wasteland. The Bellagio, the grandest hotel on the Strip, has its own fine-art gallery, two rooms filled with the works of Picasso, Monet, van Gogh, Hopper, and El Greco, on loan from the Phillips Collection in Washington. Within the Venetian is a shopping mall; like the plaza outside, it's artfully designed to resemble the streets of Venice. The illusion is perfect: the canal winds its way between shops and passes beneath bridges, and upon the barrel ceiling is painted a blue sky so lifelike that you'd swear the clouds move. After dark a shaft of light lances up from the apex of the Luxor, a white beam so brilliant you can imagine angels following it into heaven.

And yet, beneath all this over-the-top grandeur, you discover people. You go to Vegas expecting hookers in hot pants and Mafia types for whom the f-word serves as noun, verb, adjective, and adverb; who you

find instead are hard-working card dealers, bartenders, cashiers, bellhops, waiters, and doormen. A bartender became genuinely concerned when I thought I had lost my wallet. A passing security guard noticed that I had forgotten to shut the door after I returned to my room one evening; he quietly tapped on the door, stuck his head in to ask if I was okay. A waiter brought me a small bowl of salsa to go with my scrambled eggs, and stayed for a minute to chat about what was on the front page of the morning newspaper. There may be corruption and cynicism here, yet there's also heart and soul.

For dinner, you can go to a hotel coffee shop and gorge yourself with roastbeef, mashed potatoes, and apple strudel from the all-you-can-eat buffet. Or you visit a four-star restaurant and dine on veal marsala while a roaming violinist serenades you with a Bach concerto. Afterwards you sit in an outdoor bar and get plastered on margaritas while listening to a half-decent band do Jimmy Buffett songs while you play with the luminescent yo-yo you've purchased from a cigarette girl in black fishnet stockings and impossibly high heels. And once you've done these things, but you're still not ready to surrender to the beep-whoop-ching of the slot machines, you can always leave the planet.

It's not hard. All you have to do is catch a taxi to the place where Ernst Stavro Blofeld once kept his secret headquarters.

The Las Vegas Hilton is just off the Strip, in what passes as the old part of town. If this particular high-rise looks a little familiar, that's because it once doubled as the Whyte House, the fictional casino in *Diamonds Are Forever* where James Bond tracked down his arch-nemesis; Circus Circus, another locale for that movie, is just a couple of blocks away. 007 has long since checked out, but a newer and more powerful fantasy has taken his place.

"Star Trek: The Experience" is located on the ground floor, just past a small casino made up in a rather cheesy-looking outer-space motif. A large fiberglass reproduction of the movie-version *Enterprise* is suspended from the ceiling above the ticket counter; it costs twenty bucks to get in, but you can go back again if you wish. The lady behind the counter stamps the back of your palm, but you can't see the mark she's left until you proceed up the ramp to the entrance. The guy minding the turnstile wears a Starfleet costume and Trek-style alien makeup; he greets you as an "Earth person" before he shows you how to form a Vulcan salute with your hand before you place it upon the "identification pad." A concealed black-light reveals the Starfleet insignia; the ensign rips your ticket, blesses you like an orthodox Jewish rabbi—I've always wanted to say "mazel tov" when some Tekkie does that to me—and lets you through. Well, okay. . . you've already had your cheese, so you might as well have some baloney to go with it.

From this point on, though, your money becomes well-spent, particularly if you're a lifelong Trek fan. A long walkway takes you past trophy cases displaying costumes and props from the various TV serials and movies; most the emphasis is upon *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the films, with a less attention paid to the original series from '60s and *Deep Space Nine*; tellingly, there's almost nothing from *Voyager*, the lowest-rated and least-acclaimed of the four Trek shows. Theme music drifts through ceiling speakers as you make your way past the museum; an occasional video monitor shows clips from the shows. The walkway is designed to divert your attention while you're standing in line, but since I made my visit during dinner I didn't have that problem.

The show starts once every forty-five minutes. It begins when a tour guide, who also wears a Starfleet uniform, presses a button that opens a

## Primary Ignition

sliding door and allows you to enter a small circular room. She gets you to stand upon marked places on the floor, six persons in each row, in front of five doors. A brief pause while a video on an overhead TV screens warns you not to go any further if you're pregnant or have a heart condition, much the same spiel you get when you're about to board a roller-coaster at Six Flags. The video ends, and it looks as if the guide is about to press a button to open the doors . . .

And that's when the lights go out. Pitch black. The floor shakes, and there's a loud electronic hum. The lights come back up, and then . . .

No. Sorry. I'm not going to spill the beans. Some readers may be planning a trip to Las Vegas with the intent of seeing this show, and I don't wish to ruin it for them. Didn't you hate it when some jerk told you that Spock dies at the end of *Star Trek II*, or that the *Enterprise* is destroyed during *Star Trek III*? I'm not going to do that to you, and "Star Trek: The Experience" is enough like a movie that it would be unethical of me to reveal any secrets. Some of it is hokey, yes, but some of it may genuinely surprise you; I prefer to err on the side of caution and keep my mouth shut.

However, I'll reveal this much: the highlight of the show is a six-minute ride within a shuttlecraft simulator. It's pretty impressive; I clutched the armrests and was sincerely glad that I hadn't eaten dinner before I got aboard. A team of Hollywood special-effects engineers and artists were employed to create the effects—the Hugo Award-winning artist Bob Eggleton among them—and if it doesn't blow you away, then you might as well spend the rest of your vacation sitting in front of a video poker machine. You may or may not consider it worth twenty bucks, but it's certainly worth your time.

Ultimately, perhaps this is what Las Vegas is all about: dreams and optical illusions, the best money can buy.

During the decades of prosperity following World War II, what had once been a forgotten silver-mining town quickly became the only place where one could indulge in activities illegal everywhere else in the country. That was Vegas's golden age, the Vegas of Sinatra and Elvis, captured by films like Ocean's 11 and *Viva Las Vegas*. Hunter S. Thompson was perhaps the last person to document that era, yet almost thirty years after its original serialization in *Rolling Stone*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has become more of a contemporary novel than a lasting portrait; the domain of lounge-lizards and Republican district attorneys that Duke and Gonzo rampaged through simply doesn't exist any longer.

Yet Las Vegas couldn't remain Sin City. When other states realized that they could gain enormous tax revenues by allowing casinos to operate on Indian reservations or upon river boats, Vegas was forced to reinvent itself. That meant cleaning up its act, making itself family-friendly, less sinister. Gone from the Strip are the hookers and the strip joints; in their place are Planet Hollywood and Pirate's Cove. Slot machines are no longer in the restrooms, and you're going to have to drive to some part of town I didn't see if you want to buy drugs.

It's become commonplace to refer to Vegas as a Disneyland for adults, yet that's an over simplification. A more accurate way of perceiving the city is in terms of virtual reality: Las Vegas is a large-scale representation of how America sees itself. When you go to a movie, you're not seeing reality—you're seeing a facsimile of reality, clever or otherwise, and paying good money for the privilege. With its larger-than-life standing sets, dazzling special effects, and soundtrack of '60s boogie music, Las Vegas is an interactive movie.

This was brought home to me when I tried to leave Vegas. Flying back to New England, I was supposed to make a connection in Phoenix, but the crash

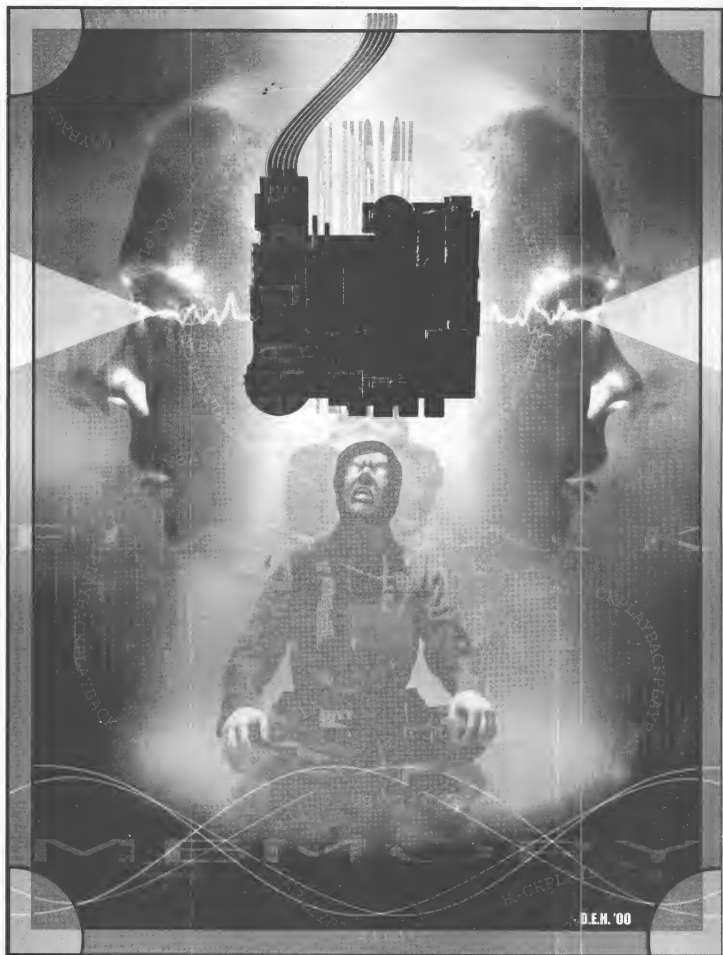
of a regional air-traffic control computer in Los Angeles caused flights all across the western United States to be delayed. By the time I arrived in Phoenix, my flight to Hartford had already departed. The sweet young lady at the America West ticket counter presented me with a choice; either stay overnight in Phoenix, or fly back to Vegas and catch the red-eye to Hartford.

I didn't want to spend the night in an airport hotel, so I opted for a seat on the last plane to Hartford. The Phoenix airport was more or less like any other airport in which I've ever spent layover time, but once I walked down the jet way into Las Vegas International, there was no mistake where I was, even if I had been there only three hours earlier. What other airport has slot machines at the gates, or the taped voices of Frankie Vallée and Don Rickles asking you to stand on the right side of the conveyer strip?

I had three hours to kill, so I found a bar near my gate. I meant to pass the time by writing, but the table I had chosen offered a view through a soundproof plate-glass window. In the far distance, just past the runway outer markers, lay the blue-red-gold lights of the Strip. Night had fallen upon Vegas; a full moon was rising above the mountains. For a few moments, it seemed as if I was gazing upon the backdrop of a movie set.

After awhile I put down my pen, ordered another Dos Equis from the barmaid. This wasn't reality. This was Las Vegas. Is there a difference? After a few drinks, does it matter?





# Black Boxes

Matthew S. Rotundo

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66 **M**r. Sable, my name is Jeremy Aldrich. I'm a public defender. I've been assigned to represent you in court."

Sable sat cross-legged on the concrete floor of his cell, arms folded, rocking himself. A small sound escaped his throat.

"Mr. Sable, do you know why I'm here? Do you understand that you've been charged with murder?"

Jeremy's voice echoed hollowly off the cinder block walls. Sable gave no reply.

"Mr. Sable, do you know why you're here?"

Sable paused in his rocking. "Little brother is watching you," he whispered. "Little brother is watching."

Jeremy frowned. He sat on the edge of Sable's cot, opened his briefcase, and dug out a yellow legal pad and pen. At the top of the paper, he scribbled the words *Sable: First Interview*. On the next line, he jotted *little brother—contact family* and added a question mark.

The alleged killer was smaller of frame than he would have thought. The arrest report listed him at five foot eight and a half, a hundred and twenty pounds. Triangular face, thinning brown hair, eyeglasses, sallow cheeks. Dressed in an orange inmate singlet. Identified as Franklin Lee Sable. The accused.

A fairly intelligent man, according to the file. Degree in electronics engineering. He had lost his job about a year ago . . . right around the time the murders began.

The Black Box Killer, the pundits called him. Fourteen murders. Fourteen mutilated bodies. Jeremy, who had sat in on more homicide cases than he cared to count, had been sickened by the coroner's playbacks.

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Sable, would you like to discuss the details of your case?"

Sable resumed his rocking. His lips moved silently.

"The . . . ah, remains found in your trash barrel have been sent to the pathologist. The report isn't back yet, but I think we should prepare ourselves for the worst."

Jeremy paused for a reply, got none. "Mr. Sable, our conversation is protected by lawyer-client privilege. None of what I save on my personal recorder can be used as evidence in court. Your black box is protected in the same way. You may speak candidly with me."

"Black box," Sable said. "I'm a black box. Black box."

Jeremy leaned forward for a closer look at the man's eyes, waving a hand in front of his face. Sable rocked, unseeing.

Jeremy scribbled more notes on his legal pad: *psych exam . . . competency hearing?*

Angry red scars stood out on the back of Sable's neck, a jarring contrast to his pale skin. The wounds were self-inflicted, according to the arrest report. Jeremy scratched

absently at the back of his own neck; the skin around his output jack was dry and irritated. He wrote *possible suicide attempt* and added another question mark.

He remained in the cell for another hour, making notes, outlining the beginnings of a defense strategy, trying to get Sable to talk. The alleged killer remained unresponsive. When he had seen enough, Jeremy stuffed his pad back into his briefcase and stood. "I'll be back, Mr. Sable. If you need to get in touch with me, let the guard outside know."

He lingered a moment longer, staring down at the scrawny man on the floor—the enigma he had been assigned to decipher.

The guard unsealed the cell door and showed him out.

**H**e stayed late at the office that night, watching playback on a wall monitor in a darkened conference room until his eyes burned in their sockets. Papers from the case file lay scattered across the table before him.

Every second of the arrest had been dutifully recorded: from the moment officers had arrived on the scene to investigate reports of a disturbance to the discovery of Sable lying in a fetal position on the living room carpet, the back of his neck slicked with blood, a scalpel clutched in one hand. He was surrounded by scattered components from a television and stereo that had been smashed. On tape, both arresting officers made mention of an awful stench permeating the house, which had led to the search. In the garage, they found a taser gun, a crowbar, and trash bags full of blood and what appeared to be brain matter.

Jeremy reviewed the attempted interrogation of Sable, carefully watching the chrono readouts for any unexplained gaps or other signs that the playback had been spliced. He detected none, nor did he find any improprieties in the questioning. As he had with Jeremy, Sable responded to the interrogation by rocking himself and muttering nonsense.

A knock came at the conference room door, and Anna Sullivan stepped in. "Sorry to interrupt, Jeremy," she said. "I got your memo. You wanted to talk to me?"

Jeremy stopped the playback. The wall monitor went dead; the lights brightened. He squinted as his tired eyes tried to adapt.

Anna sat down across the table from him, glancing briefly at the papers scattered on its surface. Her smartly curled hair and her business suit—still neatly creased even after a long day's work—clashed with Jeremy's rumpled shirt and disheveled appearance. "Working late yourself, I see," she said.

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"Yeah. Unfortunately." He pulled a tiny bottle of moisturizer from his suit pocket and squeezed a few cooling drops into each eye.

"What did you want to see me about?"

Jeremy massaged his temples. "It's becoming clear that the Sable trial is going to demand all my time. I don't suppose you have any room in your caseload, do you?"

Anna laughed incredulously. "Are you kidding? There isn't a lawyer in this office with room for another case, Jeremy."

"Sorry. Stupid question, I guess. But I had to ask, and you have the most seniority."

Anna studied him for long moments before responding. "You know, you shouldn't be throwing so much of yourself into this case. What's the point? Sable's going down."

"Not necessarily. I still have an insanity defense."

"No, you don't. The guy destroyed evidence, Jeremy."

He sighed. As usual, Anna had put her finger directly on the crux of the case.

Sable's alleged victims ranged from teenaged to elderly, six men, eight women. Among the murdered were four prostitutes, an emergency room intern, a policeman, a local crime reporter. . . others. All the victims were in some way connected with the seedier side. All had been abducted, strangled, and mutilated so horribly that they had to be identified with fingerprints and dental records. Their foreheads had been split open and pried apart with a crowbar, the coroners' reports suggested. Much of the victims' cerebrums had been ripped out in order to get at the personal recorders implanted at the bases of their brains. Sable had paid attention to detail: not only were the wafer-thin central storage units removed, medical examiners also found no trace of the spidery control leads that connected the units to the frontal lobes. The victims' eyes had been gouged out to get at the optic nerve leads; the sides of their heads had been cracked open to retrieve the auditory sensors. Even the output jacks, located in the back of the neck, had been removed.

Some pundits in the media had speculated that the murders were the future of crime. After all, personal recorders or black boxes, as they were called, were marketed as the last word in security: the ultimate, omnipresent eyewitness. Ripping out a person's black box, the pundits suggested, was only logical.

"Yes," Jeremy said. "It's a sticking point, I know. Destroying the black boxes demonstrates an understanding of how they could incriminate him. But I've visited the guy. I'm telling you, he has no idea what's happening to him."

"He's faking it."

"You sound so sure of yourself."

"Years of experience, Jeremy. Don't let this guy fool you."

"Thanks." He cradled his head in his hands, staring at his scattered case file.

"Oh, quit pouting," she said. "I'll take your leftovers."

He glanced at her, surprised. "Really?"

"Don't ask me twice."

He held his hands up in front of him. "All right. I won't tempt fate. Thanks, Anna."

"What do you have?"

He gave her a brief overview of his current client list, a typical assortment of losers:

An accused rapist who had inexplicably saved some playback from the "date" in question. As the monitor had displayed scenes of a woman struggling and screaming, he had pointed to the screen and said, "You see? She wanted it. She wanted it like that."

A drunk driver, third offense, who had resisted arrest. The state trooper who had made the bust had used force to subdue the man, who now saw himself as the next Rodney King. His playback had been laughably spliced, editing out footage to make it appear as though he had been unfairly attacked. The trooper's playback painted a different picture of the arrest.

A middle-aged housewife accused of stalking her neighbors. "But look," she had pleaded, as the screen displayed an image shot from outside a bedroom window the neighbors', Jeremy presumed. The young couple on the bed groaned and perspired with the exertions of anal intercourse. "It's sinful, Mr. Aldrich!" she had exclaimed. "The Bible says so! They should be arrested, not me!"

And a dozen others just like her.

"I'll download the case files in the morning," Jeremy said. "But I feel bad about dumping all this on you. Are you sure it's all right?"

"Buy me a beer sometime, and we'll call it even."

"Deal." He scratched at the back of his neck.

"What's wrong? Is your jack still bothering you?"

"A little."

"Let me see." She stood and came around the table. Jeremy inclined his head obligingly. Hesitantly, she reached out and touched the knobby protuberance. "It's really red and irritated, Jeremy. You should have a doctor look at that."

"I have. He says it's psychosomatic."

Anna snorted, returning to her seat. "That's crap. I never have any kind of trouble with my jack."

"Yeah. Well." Jeremy was silent for a moment. "Anna, why did you have your recorder implanted?"

She crossed her arms. "What . . . what does that have to do with anything?"

"The standard reason, right?" Jeremy said. "Personal security? Just like they tell you in the commercials?"

"Why else?" She turned her head slightly, watching him from the corners of her eyes. "You don't think I'm one of those weirdos who sells her playbacks to cable television, do you?"

"I suppose not."

"Why are you asking me this?"

Jeremy shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Listen, Anna, thanks again for helping me out."

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Still wary, Anna uncrossed her arms and stood. "Just remember to buy me a beer sometime. It's late, Jeremy. Go home."

She left him alone in the conference room once more. Jeremy watched her go, then turned back to the monitor and cued up the playback again.

The media located Jeremy the next morning. In half an hour, he received twenty phone calls from tabloid reporters offering to buy whatever playback Franklin Lee Sable might have saved in his black box. The offers began in the mid five figures and quickly escalated. Jeremy eventually had to pull the phone cord out of the wall.

He returned to the corrections center to visit Sable. Once more, he sat on the cot and watched the man rock himself, cross-legged, on the floor. According to the guard outside, Sable had neither slept nor eaten all night.

"Let me tell you several things," Jeremy said. "I've formulated a preliminary strategy. First, I believe we'll ask for a competency hearing to determine your fitness to stand trial. I've ordered a psychiatric examination for you. With the right diagnosis, we may be able to avoid a trial altogether."

"But I have to be honest: the case against you is strong. The taser and the trash bags have your fingerprints on them. And if the DNA tests in the pathologist's report can link the brain tissue found on your premises to any of the victims, the case is going to get a lot stronger. Do you understand me so far?"

Sable rocked. He made a low crooning noise.

"Under these circumstances," Jeremy said, "I'd normally recommend an insanity plea. But your case has certain . . . peculiarities . . . that preclude such a defense." He paused, remembering his conversation with Anna the night before. "What I'm getting at, then, is this: if you're faking this psychosis and your records show that you're intelligent enough to try it then you're wasting your time."

He let the words sink in. Sable muttered something, repeated it. Jeremy leaned closer, cocking an ear.

"Little brother loves you. Do you love little brother? Little brother loves you."

None of Sable's ramblings made any sense. The man had no family, no younger siblings. Both parents were dead. Jeremy watched him rock himself, waiting for any break, any hint of recognition, any glimmer of understanding.

"Mr. Sable, you may not realize it, but I'm trying to help you. You're not giving me much to work with here. If we go into court with nothing but this. . . this *act* of yours, you

may very well wind up in the electric chair. Is that what you want?"

"The eyes are the windows of the soul," Sable said. "The eyes are the windows of the soul."

Jeremy sat back and passed a hand over his face. He tried to see Sable as Anna saw him a cynical, sociopathic posturer but he just couldn't do it. Anna hadn't sat with Sable, hadn't looked into his blank stare.

"This is a waste of time," Jeremy said under his breath. He called for a guard. A beefy man in police uniform appeared at the cell door, unsealed it for him.

"Let me know if his condition changes," Jeremy told the guard. "Any change, you understand? I need to be able to talk to this man. You call me, any time, day or night. Got it?"

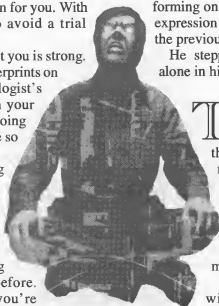
The guard cast a dubious glance over Jeremy's shoulder. "Whatever you say, counselor."

"And if he doesn't eat tonight, I want him fed intravenously. Will you see to that?"

"Sure."

Jeremy detected the faintest traces of an amused smirk forming on the guard's fat face. Something in the expression reminded him of what Anna had said the previous night: *What's the point?*

He stepped into the corridor, leaving Sable alone in his cell, still rocking.



The pathologist's report identified DNA from at least five of the Black Box Killer victims. Upon receipt of the lab results, the prosecution filed notice that it intended to ask for the death penalty. Mobs of reporters followed Jeremy wherever he went. Strangers began recognizing him on the street; he couldn't help wondering if they were recording his every move. Sable rocked and rocked.

The psychiatrist's report came back with the results he had hoped for: dissociative psychosis. Armed with the diagnosis, he filed for a competency hearing and waited.

Jeremy spent the time in the conference room, reviewing every frame of playback he could legally obtain on the Sable case.

He concentrated on the search of the premises. His hopes of finding some damning deviation from police procedure that would disallow the physical evidence had long since been dashed. He studied the playbacks for any clues, possible keys that might unlock Franklin Lee Sable.

Much of the exterior was disturbingly, maddeningly normal: a small one-story house with a weed-choked yard, sagging gutters, and wood siding marred by scabrous patches of flaked and peeling paint.

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Inside, though, was a study in schizophrenia. Sable had ravaged much of the living room, ripping apart the television and the stereo, but the bookcase in the corner still stood, the volumes on its shelves aligned in tidy rows. His bed was neatly made; his clothes hung in orderly fashion in the closet. But the other bedroom in the house was completely empty, its hardwood floor uncarpeted, its walls bare. The kitchen was small and clean, the sink clear of dirty dishes. But in the garage

Anna entered the darkened conference room without knocking. She took a seat next to Jeremy, eyes downcast. "More home movies?" she said, nodding toward the wall monitor.

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "What's up?"

"I got a call for you. I took a message." Still averting her eyes, she passed him the phone memo she held in one hand.

He scanned the message, reading by the light from the wall monitor. On the playback, one of the investigating officers was providing a grim narration as he held up clear trash bags filled with dark blood.

Jeremy read the note twice before comprehending it. "Turned down? They turned a request for a competency hearing?"

"I'm sorry, Jeremy."

"Christ." He slumped in his seat. "This has to be a joke, right?"

"Jeremy," Anna said, shaking her head slowly, "didn't you know this was going to happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on." She faced him squarely. "Quit acting like a first-year law student. The Black Box Murders have galvanized the whole community. Everyone has seen playback of the victims' corpses. You knew that. And this is an election year; no one in office wants to appear soft on crime. And Sable was caught *red-handed*, for Christ's sake. When will you face facts? He's going down."

"He's insane, Anna. He has absolutely no understanding of the charges against him. The state is planning to execute a mentally incompetent man."

"It's an act."

"No, it's not. I just can't prove it."

"How on Earth *would* you prove something like that?"

"By finding the black boxes."

"Finding the . . ." Anna regarded him with a puzzled frown. "I thought they were destroyed."

"That's what the prosecution thinks. That's what they'll try to sell to the jury." Jeremy gestured to the playback on the wall monitor. "But where's the evidence of that? No one's found a trace of the black boxes themselves no bits of wiring, no circuitry, nothing. That's a bit odd, don't you think? Considering what else has been found?"

"If he didn't destroy them, why did he go to the trouble of ripping them out?"

"I don't know." Jeremy flipped halfheartedly through the sheaves of paper on the table. "Maybe he's paranoid, thinks people are watching him all the time. Or maybe he just doesn't like black boxes."

Anna nodded slowly. "Sound like anyone you know, Jeremy?"

He stiffened, meeting her gaze. She stared back at him calmly. The playback droned on in the background.

"Suppose you're right," Anna said. "Suppose you manage to find the black boxes. What good do you think it will do?"

A wave of exhaustion, long delayed, washed over him. Jeremy rested his head on the table. "Not sure," he said, his voice muffled. "I'm just not sure."

"Face it, Jeremy: *there is* no defending this guy. William Kuntzler couldn't get him off. Jeffrey Dahmer tried an insanity defense, too. So did David Berkowitz. It didn't help them, and it won't help Sable." She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't do this to yourself. Nobody has all the answers."

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "Yeah."

The door to the conference room opened. "Mr. Aldrich?" a voice said.

Jeremy looked up. A young woman stood at the door a support staffer, one of the college students who interned in the public defender's office over the summer.

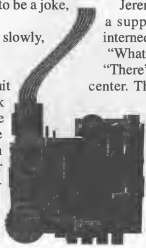
"What is it?" Jeremy said.

"There's a phone call for you from the corrections center. They want you down there right away. There's been some trouble."

Jeremy peered into the cell. Sable had been strapped to his cot with a wide leather belt across the chest, arms secured against his sides. The man strained against the belt, eyes wide, teeth gritted. A red knot stood out on his forehead.

"You said you wanted to be called if his condition changed," the beefy guard said.

"Yes, that's fine." Jeremy had already seen the playback. A nurse had been admitted into Sable's cell at 5:34 p.m. to administer an intravenous feeding. Sable, normally docile, had flown into a shrieking rage. The nurse managed to escape unharmed, and the guard on duty had sealed Sable in his cell. The prisoner started throwing himself against the walls. The guard had recorded several minutes of Sable banging against the cinder block, turning, and banging into the opposite wall. "I was waiting for backup to arrive," the guard explained. The playback became chaotic and jumbled as Sable, still shrieking, was subdued and restrained. It had taken three men to force him onto the cot and strap him down.





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"Where did he get that bump on his forehead?" Jeremy said. "Did he do that to himself?"

"I'm not sure. That may have happened when we subdued him. But you saw the playback, right? No undue force was used."

"Right. No undue force." Jeremy knew that the guard was undoubtedly recording this conversation, too protecting his own interests.

"He's been sedated," the guard said. "You probably have fifteen minutes or so before he loses consciousness."

"Who authorized that?"

"Standard procedure, counselor."

Jeremy sighed. "All right. Let me in."

The guard unsealed the door. Jeremy advanced slowly, approaching the cot as he would a venomous snake. "Mr. Sable?"

The scrawny man twisted and strained against the leather strap. He was chanting: "The eyes are the windows of the soul. The eyes are the windows of the soul. The eyes."

More gibberish. Jeremy's head sank. "I don't have time for this," he whispered.

"Windows of the soul. Windows of the soul. Windows. Windows."

"Goddamn it, I don't have time for this!"

Sable's head jerked. Their gazes met, and for the first time Jeremy saw a faint flicker of recognition. "Oh, now you want to listen, is that it? Then listen to this." Jeremy lunged at Sable, grabbing him by his bony shoulders, shaking him. "You're going on trial for murder! Nobody gives a damn about how crazy you are! They just want to see you fry in the electric chair! Do you get it? Do you get that, you sick fuck?"

He was screaming. Sable stared back, glasses askew on his face.

Jeremy released him and turned away, disgusted with himself. The guard outside may very well have heard and recorded his outburst. Sable might have, too, for that matter.

Behind him, Sable whispered, "Eyes are the windows of the soul . . . eyes . . . pale blue eye . . . vulture eye . . . evil eye . . . eyes . . ."

Jeremy half-turned back to the cot. "What did you say?"

"Like to watch . . . like to watch . . . windows of the soul . . . windows of the soul . . ."

Sable was gone, his gaze once again empty. His whisper trailed off to inaudibility. He continued mouthing the words, over and over.

Something he had said. . . Jeremy recognized it from somewhere. He concentrated, trying to recall where he had heard it before, a long time ago.

Dark suspicions blossomed in his mind. Slow horror suffused him. "Oh, my God."

He rushed to the cell door and pounded on it, demanding release.

He was escorted to Sable's house in an unmarked car to avoid attracting media attention. It was on a suburban street, homes lined up in neat rows, most of them quiet with the lateness of the hour. Jeremy's heart rate accelerated as the car pulled up to the curb and parked.

He got out and approached the house with his escort a cop dressed in beat blues in tow, stepping over the sawhorses that cordoned off the premises. The front door had been sealed with yellow tape: POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. A sticker was pasted to the door, printed with a warning of legal penalties for violating a crime scene.

Jeremy produced a pocket knife and sliced through the tape. "Do you have the key?" he said to his escort.

Wordlessly, the policeman stepped forward and unlocked the door.

"Wait here," Jeremy said.

The cop nodded toward the darkened house.

"What do you expect to find in there?"

"I'll let you know." Jeremy stepped inside.

As he entered, the rank odor of decay, still strong, swept over him. Jeremy gagged and covered his mouth with one hand. He felt along the wall for a switch, found one, flicked it.

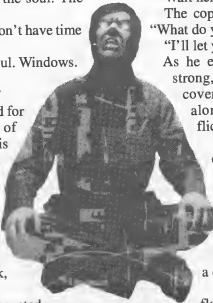
He was in the living room a couch and chair with ragged upholstery, entertainment center, bookcase in the corner. The smashed television and stereo had been confiscated as evidence; only a few bits of broken glass remained in their stead. The carpet near the center of the room bore a dark bloodstain.

The scars on the back of Sable's neck flashed through Jeremy's mind. As if in reflexive response, he sent the mental command that activated his black box, knowing it would be good to have a record of this.

He ignored the signs of violence. Instead, he took a closer look at the bookcase. The volumes on its shelves were dusty but handsomely bound. He noted the names on the spines: Dumas, Dickens, Orwell . . . Poe.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered. He pulled the Poe volume off the shelf and opened it to the table of contents. Sure enough, "The Tell-Tale Heart" was listed there, page three hundred sixty-three. Jeremy set the book back in its place.

From the playbacks, he knew the layout of the house by heart. A short hallway extended off to the right. He flicked on another overhead light, revealing three doors two on the right, one on the left. The first door on the right opened on



## Absolute Magnitude

the bathroom, he knew. The door on the left was the master bedroom. The second door on the right . . .

It was the empty room, the one with the bare walls and the uncarpeted hardwood floor. No furnishings. An empty closet with a sliding door. Jeremy stepped into the room and turned in a slow circle, peering at corners.

Heart pounding, he knelt and began pressing on the narrow floorboards. They creaked under his weight. He worked methodically, from one side of the room to the other, feeling for what he knew had to be there.

He found nothing as he crawled across the floor. Doubts surfaced in his mind. Ignoring them, he slid open the closet door and checked the floor there.

A squeak sounded. Some of the boards were loose.

Jeremy got out his pocketknife again, inserting it between the boards, prying them apart. He removed two short slats, disclosing a lightless space beneath a hole in the subfloor. A faint foulness, like an echo of the stench permeating the rest of the house, wafted from the hidden hole. A small black spider crawled out and scuttled away.

Jeremy cursed himself for not remembering to bring a flashlight. With bated breath and shaking hands, he reached into the hole.

His fingers brushed something wiry and delicate. He closed his eyes and grasped it, his gorge rising. He pulled it out and opened his eyes.

He held a square of wafer-thin circuitry with long, spidery wires. It twirled, dangling. A black box. Jeremy held it by one of the optic leads. Bodily fluids had crusted on the wires.

He dropped it; the thing clattered on the floorboards. His gorge surged. Shuddering, he fought it, forcing it back down, forcing himself to remain calm.

When he felt in control of himself again, he reached back into the hole. He pulled out another black box. And another. And another. He laid them out in a row in front of him, fourteen in all.

He reached deeper, found coils of wire and small component parts like those from the television and the stereo. He felt around the hole a final time, found one last item: stapled sheets of crumpled paper printed with thick knots of circuit diagrams. Each sheet was labeled: AURAL LEAD (LEFT), AURAL LEAD (RIGHT), OUTPUT JACK

*Like to watch.*

*The eyes are the windows of the soul.*

The scars on the back of Sable's neck.

A degree in electronics engineering.

*Like to watch.*

Jeremy thought of the woman who had stalked her neighbors, of the guard who had taped Sable slamming himself into walls, of the Rodney King wanna-be who had taped the police officer who'd pulled him over, of the police officer who'd pulled him over taping him . . . and of poor, twisted Franklin Lee Sable.

Like the rest of them, Sable watched. But he hadn't been satisfied with the mundane details of his own life. So he took the next logical step. He had stalked victims who had seen what he wanted to see: the prostitutes, the policeman, the emergency room intern and had removed their souls, and had tried somehow to rewire his own output so he could look through their eyes.

"Little Brother is watching you," Jeremy whispered.

He chuckled, staring at the row of souls lined up before him. He was going to get Sable acquitted, after all.

After the operation, Jeremy called the office to check in. Anna answered the phone.

"It's Jeremy, Anna."

"How did it go?" she asked.

Jeremy lay back on the hospital bed. "The prognosis is good, the doctor said. I should be out of here tomorrow."

"That's terrific. We got a call from the *Harvard Law Review*, you know. They want to interview you."

"Yeah. Well. I'm not interested."

"They said your defense was brilliant."

"No," Jeremy said. "The black boxes won it, not me. The fact that they hadn't been destroyed took away the prosecution's case. That's all there was to it, really."

"Even so, Jeremy, congratulations."

"Thanks." The scar that marked where his output jack had been itched under the bandages. Gingerly, he touched his scalp, shaved at the temples and around the ears, all heavily bandaged. He tried hard not to scratch. Doctor's orders.

"I still don't understand why you had it removed, Jeremy," she said. "It seems kind of . . . extreme."

"Let's just say I've decided I have better things to do than worry about playback."

Anna laughed softly. "I suppose. See you at the office?"

"In about a week or so."

They said their good-byes, and Anna disconnected. Jeremy hung up the phone and stared at the ceiling.

"Black box," he said. "I'm a black box." He closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep.



# Mirusha

Geoffrey A. Landis

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In the twenty-first century, John Radkowski discovered, the job of astronaut was a half step down from truck driver.

Expensive, high tech satellites were delivered by unmanned space boosters: cheap, reusable, and too small to ferry humans, they made fortunes for the far-sighted investors who had invested in the low-cost transportation and built the whirling network of satellites that surrounded the Earth like a plague of gnats.

To launch people into space, though, they still used the ancient space shuttles. Refurbishing and upgrading had made the shuttles more efficient, had added all-electronic controls and liquid-propellant fly-back boosters, but they were still recognizably the fragile white elephants that had flown in the previous century. Decades of pampering care had made each shuttle orbiter idiosyncratic, with its own set of operating procedures and engineering work-arounds for misbehaving parts. With never quite enough money to adequately refurbish them, and far too little to engineer a new launch system, the space shuttles were still the best way to reliably launch humans into space.

The job of astronaut meant that Radkowski ferried scientists up and down to the space station, and was responsible for shepherding the scientists while they were in space, making sure that they followed safety regulations and didn't do anything that would jeopardize the station or their own lives. This, he discovered, was a tough job. The scientists—pierced and pony-tailed young men with goatees and glasses, earnest-faced young women with irreverent tee-shirts and disconcertingly direct gazes that he had trouble meeting—the scientists had almost an uncanny instinct for skipping safety rules and getting in trouble.

It was a job.

The first time John Radkowski visited the Space Station he had been impressed with the sheer size of it. The modules had seemed small when he trained in the weightless tanks, but once out there, in orbit, all the modules together with trusses and external experiment modules and solar arrays and appendages, it seemed to be huge.

Inside, the first thing to hit him was how noisy it was. He had expected silence, or perhaps the muted hum of an air circulation fan. Instead it had been full of sounds, clatters and clicking and hums; buzzes of machinery and whirring of fans, computers and lab equipment monitors beeping, voices carrying from modules far away. Then he was impressed with how cluttered it was. Later he amended that: not cluttered, exactly, just crammed. Every wall was filled with things, and in a space station, that meant the "floor" and the "ceiling" walls as well. It was almost impossible to find anything, unless you had remembered to make a clear note of where it had been put.

He met Ryan Martin on his fifth ferry trip up to the orbiting laboratory.

Ryan had, at first, seemed to be just another of the scientists: a pony-tailed young man with a growth of facial hair just too short to be called an actual beard. He found Ryan buried in the equipment or taking data or talking with the other scientists; John Radkowski had never been good with people, and it took him a long time to even learn his name. Then, it surprised him to find out that he was not one of the scientists at all, but actually one of the Canadian astronauts, on his first mission to the space station. It wasn't his job to fix the equipment; it wasn't his job to take data or talk to the scientists. He just liked doing it.

The American space station—it was by name an international space station, but everybody called it American—was not the only space station in orbit.

The Russians had originally been a partner in American-led space station program, but after the bloody Civil War and the war of Kamchatka independence, they had dropped out. Nobody had ever thought that their space program would ever be resurrected, but, dogged and determined, the Russians had held on. Small, cramped, and perpetually on the verge of breaking down, the Mirusha was built and kept operational—barely—as a matter of national pride. Its name, the little Mir, was a tribute the earlier Mir space station, long since burned up in the Earth's atmosphere. The Russians did not intend for anybody to forget who had had a space station first. It also meant a little world, appropriate for the tiny cylinder of atmosphere in orbit around the Earth; or with a slight change in pronunciation and spelling, it meant little Mary, which was the pet name the Russian cosmonauts unofficially favored.

As it happened, although the Russian Mirusha was in nearly an identical orbit, it had an orbital plane tilted in a different orientation. The laws of orbital mechanics mandate that there is no easy way to change orbital planes. To get to the Russian Mirusha from the International Space Station required so great an orbital plane change that the easiest way to do it would actually be to return to the Earth and take off again into the new orbit.

So when the news came through the grapevine that the two Russian cosmonauts in the Mirusha were in trouble, that the station was leaking and the Russians had blown up two launch vehicles trying to rescue them, John Radkowski nearly ignored the news. They would be rescued, or not rescued, but the situation, he figured, had nothing to do with the American space station, or with him.

Each day that he was space station commander, at the end of his shift Radkowski would float through the space station,

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checking all the seals, verifying that the safety equipment was accessible and that none of the pressure hatches were blocked by cables or equipment. He came across Ryan Martin in the electronics laboratory module. He was working an electrical breadboard that was connected to a microwave antenna pressed hard against the small external porthole. From the look of it, Ryan had built it himself.

"A C-band transmitter?" Radkowski said. "You have a frequency-control permit for that?"

"Nah," Ryan said. "Nobody uses those old low-frequency microwave bands but the Russians; a permit would be nothing but paperwork. Anyway, it's a low power rig, not good for much but orbit to orbit."

Radkowski liked the young astronaut, but it bothered him when he dismissed management directives so quickly. Who knew what experiments the science crew might be running that could be ruined by unregulated electromagnetic interference? Well, for that matter, Ryan Martin probably did know—he kept up with all the work that the scientists were doing, and seemed to always know what experiment runs were being scheduled when.

Ryan looked at his calculator. "They should be over the horizon any second now." He powered up his home-made transmitter. "Mirusha, this is Space Station. Mirusha, space station. Are you there?"

"Da, Mirusha here." A heavily accented voice. "This is Martin?"

"Yes, Martin here. How are you holding out down there, buddies?"

"Holding out not so good."

"Any chance of rescue?"

There was a long pause. "We think not."

"Can you use your return capsule?"

"No."

The Mirusha station had an ancient Soyuz module attached. The Soyuz spacecraft was, according to the design specifications, the lifeboat that the crew was to use to return to Earth in the event of a failure. But the Soyuz had been designed for only one year in orbit.

"We have been using it for junk storage," the Russian said.

"We have been removing out the junk and try to power up the systems. No is working." Long pause. "Is designed for one year in orbit. Is now twelfth year. Nothing works. Is junk."

"Better than suffocating."

"No," the Russian replied. The signal was beginning to acquire static. "Cannot undock, my friend. Is welded to Mirusha. Not even big hammer can work to undock."

"Signal's breaking up, buddies," Ryan said. "I'd better sign off. Hang in there, buddies."

"Da," the Russian replied. "We will hang here. Where else we hang, no?"

And then there was nothing but static.

"Passed over the horizon," Ryan said. "If we had a joint data-relay agreement, I could relay communications, but as it is, that's it for today."

Radkowski hadn't realized how bad the Russians' situation was. But there was nothing they could do about it, he knew. The Russians would have to solve their own problems. "You talk to them every day?" he asked. It was an odd hobby, talking to the other space station over what was, essentially, an amateur radio link, but there were no regulations against it.

"When there's a line-of-sight window," Ryan said. "I like Russians. They're the friendliest people in the world. And their space station may be small and cramped and low-budget, but it's still a space station, and it's great that they've managed to keep it going, with a budget of old paperclip and broken rubber bands."

He paused for a moment, and then added, "If nobody else is going to do it, I will."

"You will what?" Radkowski asked

"Why, I'll save them."

Radkowski chuckled. "Right," he said. "You do that."

Garbage is a big deal on a space station.

Garbage accumulates. Food containers and byproducts, used and reused pieces of paper, human waste, broken equipment, worn-out underwear, used chemicals, filled barf-bags, shaving bags, and vacuum-cleaner bags, sanitary napkins, used-up sponges, biological sample containers, dead petri dish cultures, used personal hygiene supplies, waste water too contaminated to recycle—garbage accumulates. With every docking of a logistics transfer vehicle, more material is brought up to the space station, and all of it, eventually, becomes garbage.

Some of it can be returned to Earth with the shuttles. But more refuse and waste water is generated on the space station than can be returned to Earth in the empty space in a personnel transfer module.

Garbage can't be just thrown overboard; garbage tossed out a hatch would accumulate in the same orbit as the station, turning into lethal debris at the orbital velocity of 17,000 miles per hour. Not even the waste water can be vented; one of the benefits of the station is to use high-vacuum environment of space, and a waste water dump would contaminate the environment near the station, destroying its usefulness.

Instead, garbage is lowered on a string.

Or, something more than just string.

The cable was made of a superfiber material called Spectra 10K. It consisted of a thread of buckminsterfullerene nanotubes woven in a matrix of polyethylene. It was nearly as thin as spiderweb, and despite a coating of fluoropolymer, almost as invisible.

Fifty kilometers of the superfiber was wound up on a silicon-carbide deployment spool barely larger than his fist. Despite its thinness, the cable was plenty strong enough to hold the weight of an entire space shuttle, if it had to.

Fullerine fiber is strong.

The principle is simple. A month's load of garbage is placed into a plastic disposal bag, which is attached to one end of a spool of thin superfiber. The garbage load is dropped out of the nadir hatch, and nudged infinitesimally backward in orbit. A satellite in its own right, but tethered to the spacecraft by the superfiber cable, the garbage-satellite drops into a lower, and hence faster orbit. It moves ahead of the station, and unwinds the superfiber behind it. A brake on the superfiber reel pulls back on the garbage, and the more the garbage is pulled backward, the lower the orbit it drops into. At its full extension of twenty kilometers, the garbage satellite hangs directly below the space station. Now the superfiber cable is pulling straight outward on the garbage. And then the cable is cut.

When the cable is cut, the garbage satellite drops into an orbit lower yet. The orbit, in fact, has a perigee which is lower than the space station's orbit by exactly seven times the length of the tether. Left to itself, the garbage would diverge from the space station by a hundred and forty kilometers. But an orbit a hundred and forty kilometers below the space station skims through the Earth's atmosphere. Anything in such an orbit will burn up.

And so, in the form of a briefly flaring meteor, the garbage is returned to the Earth it came from. It was a far more efficient way to deorbit garbage than using a rocket; no fuel is needed, and the superfiber tether was a low-technology system no more complicated than a fishing reel.

John Radkowski was in command of the station, and had just finished running a garbage dump. It was one of the more interesting duties, actually; if performed incorrectly, the superfiber cable could snag, or could go into an oscillation such as the "skip-rope" mode, or in the worst case scenario, the brakes could fail and the tether deploy too quickly, rubber-band itself back into the station, and hit any of a million possible damage points with a two-ton wrecking-ball of garbage.

When he had completed the garbage dump and returned to the lounge area, he found Ryan Martin and several others there already there, engaged in an animated discussion.

"Hi, Ryan," he said.

"Radkowski," Ryan said. He was wearing a tee-shirt that read, "High Energy Physicists Have A Strange Charm." He floated with the tip of one foot hooked under a loop to keep him from drifting away. He was oriented sideways to Radkowski's local vertical; it didn't seem to bother him, although Radkowski still had troubles adapting to it. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"The rescue, of course."

Radkowski blinked. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

"The Russians, man," Ryan said. "The cosmonauts. We're going to rescue them."

Radkowski shrugged. "No, of course not," he said.

Ryan Martin shook his head. His body rotated in counterpoint, and the foot he had hooked under restraint loop

popped loose. He started drifting. "If we don't rescue them, it's damn certain that nobody else will," he said. "They're leaking. They've got five, maybe six days. Who's going to rescue them that fast? Not the Russians—that last blast tore the hell out of their pad; it will take them six months to get back operational. Not the U.S.; we have only four shuttles; two of them are up here with us, and we can't get them down and then back up again that fast. The other two are in for refurbishment; they're going nowhere. Not the Brazilians, they can't hit that orbit from their launch site. So, if we don't save them, then who will?"

"Don't be ignorant," Radkowski said. "Can't get there from here. They're in a completely different orbital plane."

Ryan smiled. "The crew return vehicle can do it."

Radkowski shook his head so vigorously that he had to hold on to a loop to keep from moving. "Not enough delta-vee for a plane change. Not by half."

Ryan Martin nodded. "Nope. So we have to be clever. We have to be very, very clever."

Ryan Martin, as it turned out, was clever.

The crew return vehicle was a tiny, four-person lifting body. It had been designed to be an ambulance; an emergency way to land an injured astronaut fast. It had a rocket engine for the deorbit, but not enough fuel to make the plane change needed to get into the Russian orbit. Plane change maneuvers need a tremendous amount of fuel; even if every drop of rocket fuel in the space station could be used, it would not be enough to get the little vehicle into the right orbital plane.

Ryan's plan was to use the tether. The tether was used to drop garbage downward, but there was no reason it couldn't equally well be used to sling the crew return vehicle outward. He calculated that four hundred kilometers of tether, twenty times the amount used for a garbage dump, would toss the little lifting body into an orbit with an apogee of five thousand kilometers above the Earth. "That's into the Van Allen radiation belts," he said, "but I'll only be there for less than an hour, no big exposure concern there." At the apogee of the orbit, he would fire the crew return vehicle's little rocket perpendicular to the direction of the orbit, as well as two solid propellant STAR booster rockets stolen from the perigee kick motors of satellites being repaired on the station. The trick, as he pointed out, is to gain altitude before trying to do the plane change. The farther away from the Earth, the easier it is to make a plane change, and the added five thousand kilometers that the tether boost could give him would make an enormous difference.

Radkowski closed his eyes, trying to picture the situation. He wasn't good at doing math in his head. Five thousand kilometers, that was, what, three thousand miles. Slightly less than one Earth radius. "It's still not enough," he said.

"Right," Ryan said. "Not enough. Yet. OK, here's what happens next. The return vehicle is screaming in from five thousand kilometers, see. It has a lot of excess kinetic energy to dissipate. So what happens? Here's what happens. Highly elliptical orbit. I dip into the atmosphere. But, here's the trick. I don't just use the atmosphere to brake. The return vehicle has

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lift, right? It's a lifting body. So I point it *sideways*. Roll the beggar over ninety degrees, use the lift as a vector. I can take my excess delta-*vee*, and I can turn it into *plane-change* vector. Two passes through the atmosphere, I've got the orbit circularized and as a free bonus, I get my plane change. Piece of cake."

"Shit," Radkowski said. "Does that really work?"

Ryan had been spinning lazily end over end as he talked. As he finished talking, his head was in the middle of the lounge, his feet next to the computer console. He reached out with one foot and tapped the keyboard. The screen lit up. Ryan smiled. "Believe it," he said. "I've got it all worked out in computer simulation."

Radkowski nodded. What Ryan was looking for, he realized, was not for somebody to check his work—it was obvious that he had complete confidence in that. So what was he asking about? "You're requesting permission to use the CRV?"

Ryan Martin shook his head. "Radkowski, I'm not asking your permission. I'm going, whether you agree or not."

"You take that CRV without permission," Radkowski said, "and they'll kick your ass so far out of the astronaut corps that you won't need a booster to get into orbit."

"Maybe they will." He shrugged. "Nevertheless, permission or no permission, I'm not going to leave them to die."

"OK," Radkowski said. "We'll do it."

Ryan reached out a hand to stop his slow spin, and looked up at Radkowski in surprise.

"Just one minor detail," Radkowski said.

Ryan smiled. "Name it."

"This mission you're proposing is dangerous as hell, more than likely it's not going to work, and even if it does work, it may already be too late to rescue the Russians. Half-baked, untested, dashed-together schemes like this are a formula for killing pilots. There's no chance I'm going to let you do it."

"It's not dangerous," Ryan said. "I know I'm low on pilot-in-command hours, but the computer will be doing the flying. If it looks like I can't make the rendezvous, the computer will tell me, and I will abort to Earth."

"No, you won't; you'd only end up killing yourself, and I'm not about to allow you to do that," Radkowski said. "I'm going to fly it myself."

The tether launch from the space station had been flawless, a high-stakes game of crack-the-whip, with John Radkowski, alone in the Crew Return Vehicle, at the very tip of the whip, flying off on a precisely controlled trajectory at the exact apex of the sling. He had kept his hands off the controls during the descent through the atmosphere. No human could maintain the knife-edge tolerances needed for a hypersonic lifting aeropass, and so the guidance computer, with its crystalline logic and perfect mathematical calculations, had done the flying, comparing the predictions of the computer model with the performance of the actual vehicle a thousand

times a second, adjusting in real-time for variations in exospheric density and discrepancies between the computer model and the actual vehicle.

Now, floating in the crew return vehicle, there was nothing left to do but wait for the slow pirouette of orbits to bring the Mirusha station into range. It seemed as if the vehicle was motionless, and the Earth, endlessly varying, flowing like a sluggish river beneath it. John Radkowski was waiting, alone in space. It was in situations like this, when he had nothing to do but wait, that Radkowski was alone with his inner resources, and found them wanting. He felt lost in an immensity of void stretching off in all directions, and with the realization pounding in from all around him that he was nothing, an insignificant speck in the universe.

The thought both comforted him and terrified him.

Focus on the control panel. Check the fuel levels again, for the hundredth time. Check the battery voltages. Check the radios. Focus on the radar. Is that the Russian station? No, it's still too early.

His breath came in short, shallow pants, and he struggled to control his breathing, to avoid hyperventilating. Focus on the control panel. Breathe evenly. Is that signal acquisition?

Yes. The indicator light glowed with the acquisition of carrier, and then the radio spoke. "CRV-1, here is Nordwijk. We've got you on the screens." The voice spoke in a crisp, Scandinavian-accented English. "You're looking good."

"Nordwijk, CRV-1," he said. "Thanks for the update. How long before I expect to acquire signal from Mirusha?" The mission control at Houston had been cool toward the idea of trying to fly a rescue mission—probably they still remembered the humiliation of the Russians pulling out of the space station project—but they had not actually forbidden it. The European space center in Nordwijk, on the other hand, had been enthusiastic, and guaranteed him as much help as they could give. This was little enough—radar readings from the ground tracking stations to confirm what the interior navigation of the crew return vehicle already told him—but he was glad enough for it.

"CRV-1, you should be getting transponder now," Nordwijk told him.

He frowned. He was getting nothing. No, there it was on his rendezvous radar. But where was the transponder?

He was coming up on it backwards; by the strange ballet-rules of orbital mechanics, Mirusha was coming up from behind him as he rose to meet it. He could see it now, a brilliant, lumpy star blazing in the sunlight. "Roger, I've acquired it visually," he said. He checked the rendezvous radar. Eight kilometers, closing rate one-fifty meters per second. He corrected his vehicle pitch slightly and made a three-second engine burn with the maneuvering engine, raising his perigee to bring his orbit closer to synch with the Russians, and checked the radar again. Five kilometers, closing rate fifty-two. He should be able to raise them on the radio. They knew he was coming.

# Mirusha

"Mirusha, this is the American ship CRV-1. Do you read? Mirusha, CRV-1."

No reply.

The station was dark. He brought the crew return vehicle in cautiously. With the crew on the Mirusha not responding to his increasingly insistent signaling, it would be impossible for him to dock to the station as planned. This was a problem. He was wearing a pressure suit, but it was a precaution against a vehicle repressurization only, not a suit rated for an extra-vehicular activity. There was no help for it, though. He had come this far, it would be pointless for him to stop.

"Mirusha, CRV-1. Do you read? Mirusha, do you read?"

He brought the CRV in as close to the Mirusha as he dared. He had only one safety-line, a twenty-foot line, and he clipped one end of it to the CRV and the other to the hook on his suit. Then he did a final suit check, opened the hatch, and jumped.

The docking hatch was barely six feet. He hit the station's skin, scrambled for a handhold and missed, rebounded away, and as he started spinning away, by flailing wildly he managed to hook the EVA handrail with one hand. He clutched at it and held on, and then, more calmly, pulled himself toward the hatch.

It opened freely.

There was no way for him to stay attached to the CRV when he went into the airlock. He had to unhook. The manual would have instructed him to attach a second safety line to the Mirusha before unhooking from the CRV, but there was no second line available. He unclipped the safety line, and clipped it on to the EVA handrail, trusting blindly that it would be

strong enough to prevent the CRV from drifting away and leaving him stranded.

He entered the airlock, and closed the inner door. A light should have illuminated when the inner door closed, but the chamber was pitch black. He flicked on his suit light and by its feeble illumination, found the handwheel that opened the inner door.

The wheel spun freely. There was no pressure on the other side.

In the long, slow fight against a steady leak to space, the two Russians on the space station had lost their fight. There would be no heroic rescue. The dark space station and the lack of internal pressure told him that there was no one left to rescue.

Time had run out.

In all his future years, John Radkowski would remember that lesson. You can be clever, you can come up with daring ideas, and sometimes they even work.

But sometimes, all of your work and all of your courage is not enough. Space is cold and empty and unforgiving, it does not care about human tragedy or last-minute heroics or brilliant piloting skills.

Sometimes your time runs out.



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# Book Reviews

Reviews by Mike Jones

*Worlds Vast and Various*, by Gregory Benford  
Avon/Eos, 320 pages, \$13.50  
ISBN 0-380-79054-8

Even a brief glance through Gregory Benford's third collection of short fiction, this one entitled *Worlds Vast and Various*, will reveal the true genius of his writing, and the depths of his talent. Here is an author who skillfully blends social commentary, exploration of alien concepts, and hard science to weave a fascinating tapestry. His stories are thought-provoking, weird, satirical, evocative, and often multi-layered in surprising ways.

Benford's stories are geared towards making you think: Case in point, "The Voice," which takes a future society where illiteracy is the norm thanks to personalized computer implants which serve as internal encyclopedias, Artificial Intelligences, and readers. On one level, it's a straight-forward story about the rediscovery of literacy as a clandestine, daring sport, something dangerous and cool. On another level, it's a parable about power, and literacy as power. Finally, the ending's twist places the entire story on another level altogether: that of inspirational bedtime story.

Another story, "Kollapse," comes off as a satirical look at the arrogance of the Internet elite, and how no matter how prepared you are on paper, it's still no substitute for real world experiences. At once funny and dismaying, it's far too close to reality for comfort.

"A Dance to Strange Musics" is perhaps the strangest, most alien story of the lot, as a group of explorers study Shiva, a planet in the Alpha Centauri system, and end up with far more than they bargain for.

The twelve stories that can be found in this collection primarily stem from Benford's career in the past fifteen years, although one story, "The Scarred Man,"

is a rare gem from 1970, inspired by Benford's involvement with ARPAnet, the ancestor to today's Internet. Most of the stories saw print in well-known magazines such as *Science Fiction Age*, *Analog*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but several were only seen in anthologies, and one, "Zoomers," appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. New to the collection is Benford's "Afterthoughts," which explores the origins and inspirations for each story, and offers us some more insight into where they came from, and where he was going with them at the time. Touching upon his love of F. Scott Fitzgerald, his enjoyment of Shakespeare, his homages to Bradbury and Asimov, his prophetic work with computers in 1969, his fascination with alien concepts, and his own rueful hand in inventing the concept of computer viruses, it's a telling look at the man behind the words, and well worth the price of admission.

Thus, for completionists and fans of Benford's work, this is certainly a book to look for. For those who enjoy intelligent, provocative science fiction, heavy on the science and no holds barred on the sophistication, this is also one for their shelves. However, if your idea of hard science fiction is anything starting in "Stars," you might want to skim a few stories first. All in all, *Worlds Vast and Various* is a fine introduction to Gregory Benford for the uninitiated, and a satisfying treat for those who are already fans.

*By Force of Arms*, by William C. Dietz  
Ace, 325 pages, \$6.99  
ISBN 0-441-00735-X

*By Force of Arms* was my first exposure to William Dietz, known for his military-based science fiction adventures. Now, I have a weakness for good military SF, due in no small part to my father's raising me on Heinlein and Haldeman, so I approached this book eagerly.

Unfortunately, for me, *By Force of Arms* came as something of a letdown. It's actually a sequel to previous books, *Legion of the Damned* and *By Blood Alone* and as such, seems to rely quite heavily on characters, settings, and plot points previous introduced. Often, I felt somewhat alienated and disconnected as a result, but I resolutely plowed my way through the book, hoping to pick up enough to get by. But every new mention of the mutiny of the previous book, or introduction of a character we're clearly supposed to remember, led me to the conclusion that while this is a good book, well-written with a keen eye towards military-style science fiction, it's best read *after* the others. Sadly, there wasn't any sort of prologue or explanation to make it easier on new readers; apart from a very brief blurb on the back cover, and a small mention on the front cover that this was "a return to the universe of *Legion of the Damned*" there really wasn't much to prepare someone picking this book up as their introduction to Dietz.

Now, for those already familiar with his works and settings, this will undoubtedly come as a treat. Bill Booly, now a general, is back, along with his lover, Maylo Chien-Chu, the cyborg Sergi Chien-Chu, the clone Ishimoto-Six, and all of the other familiar faces. The stakes are higher still. The Confederacy has been approached by the Thrakies, an alien race seeking sanctuary and a place to settle. The catch? They're being hunted by a fleet of genocidal machines named the Sheen, led by an artificial intelligence called the Hoon, which in turn has been subverted by its prisoner, a religious fanatic named Jeremiah Jepp, who has plans to introduce the Glory of God to everyone. Or else.

Now it's a race against time to stop Jepp, Hoon, and Sheen, all the while juggling interstellar politics, the distrusted but vitally necessary Hudathans, conspiracies, and deadly secrets. If Bill Booly can't rally the



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troops and overcome internal friction from his so-called allies, everyone's doomed. Just another job for the hero of the mutiny, right?

*By Force of Arms* is keenly-plotted, its multiple layers woven skillfully, seamlessly jumping between conspiracy, alien invaders, and Booby himself as needed, reintroducing any number of plot points from *Legion of the Damned* and adding new ones to further muddy the waters. It manages to keep up the energy, adding a growing sense of urgency until the very end. Dietz's settings are fascinating, and his characters compelling. I'll definitely be checking out some of his earlier works in the hopes that I'll enjoy a smoother introduction next time. For fans of Dietz's work, I recommend this book. For those unfamiliar with him, I recommend his writing, but suggest a stand-alone or the first in a series.

*King Rat*, by China Melville  
Tor, 319 pages, \$14.95  
ISBN 0-312-89072-9

Welcome to the new style of fantasy, a frantic, kinetic, paranoid Hong Kong exploration of our darker corners, evocative of the gritty, hard-edged end of the century feel we've come to expect. Melville's debut novel explodes onto the scene with energy and passion, and once it starts moving, it never really stops until it's hit the end.

It all starts with the brutal murder of London native Saul Gramond's father, thrown through a window in a moment of passion. Left to take the blame, a confused Saul is promptly arrested, and just as promptly rescued from confinement by an enigmatic figure known only as King Rat... his uncle. As the story unfolds, we—and Saul—learn of Saul's true heritage, as a prince of the ratfolk and heir to King Rat's throne. A throne that doesn't truly exist, ever since he was toppled from grace centuries ago in a certain town called Hamelin.

Giving in to his half-rat heritage, Saul embraces the dirt and grime and muck of

the hidden half of the city, learning his new capabilities, even as a murderous stranger stalks his friends. Things swiftly get worse as Saul becomes the unwitting tool in a battle between two forces: the Animal Kings (King Rat, Anansi of the Spiders, Lop-Lop of the Birds) and the malevolent Piper, who's been their bane for quite a long time. Finally, things all come to a bloody finale, choreographed by dark passion and accompanied by unearthly musics which threaten to enslave and destroy all who hear them.

This is a book set to rock and roll, to punk, to angry technobats and all things with attitude. London becomes a dark and dangerous place as we explore its underbelly, and the characters take on alien demeanors as their animal instincts control them. *King Rat* is urban fantasy with an emphasis on urban, reminiscent of the darker edges of de Lint's Newford works, and capturing the same feel of Emma Bull's *War For The Oaks*, though with a much bloodier, though still music-filled, climax. The concepts are, for the most part, familiar. Young man discovers his heretofore-unknown royal/magical heritage? A war between opposing supernatural factions? Undreamt-of civilizations dwelling among, beside, or under our own? You could easily label *King Rat* as a coming-of-age novel, and be entirely correct. For Saul does learn his limitations, exceeds them, and ultimately charts his own destiny, rejecting those who'd control his path. The real strength, then, is that Melville tells the story so well. *King Rat* is full of twists and turns, keeping the reader guessing with every newly-revealed secret. The unusual dialects practiced by the three Animal Kings, each one unique to that character, remind us that for all their human appearances, these are inhuman characters, alien to our way of thinking, a contrast to Saul's prominent humanity. Deftly-plotted, it lunges forward, full speed ahead, dragging the reader with it. And that may be the novel's weakness. It offers little opportunity to rest and catch one's breath, and the story's over before you

know it, despite weighing in at 300+ pages. It's possible to feel cheated, or that you've missed out on something. Or, then again, it might be the literary equivalent of a roller-coaster. This book garnered a lot of attention when it came out in hardback, and I'm happy to say it's well-deserved. If you've been holding back because of the price, now's the time to try *King Rat* for yourself.

*Year's Best SF 5*, edited by David G. Hartwell  
Avon/Eos, 494 pages, \$6.99  
ISBN 0-06-102054-0

Putting together a collection of the "Best of" anything is a dicey proposition, since ultimately, it's a rather subjective label to apply to something as individualistic as fiction. However, David Hartwell has proven himself quite capable of assembling a lineup of science fiction stories sure to please even the most discerning of palates. This year's edition is the fifth in the series, released by Avon/Eos, and does everything in its power to deserve the title of "Year's Best SF." The two dozen plus stories offered up in this edition all saw print in 1998 or 1999, save for a translation of a 1992 story by Japanese author Hiroe Suga. The majority appeared in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and the Peter Crowther-edited anthology, *Moon Shots*, though several did stem from other sources, including the magazine *Interzone*.

Curiously enough, only two of the five stories nominated for the short story Hugo are present in this collection. Michael Swanwick's "Ancient Engines," and Terry Bisson's "Macs." The other three, including Swanwick's Hugo-winning "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" are nowhere to be found, thus proving that even Hartwell can't predict the sure winners.

However, the stories we do find in this collection are fascinating, evocative, imaginative, exciting, and varied in both tone and subject, presenting a true panoramic view of the many-faceted potential of the field. Each one is a gem, and I was honestly surprised by the

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quality, and by how much I enjoyed so many of the offerings. In general principle, no anthology can please every reader with every story. That's just a fact of life. But when the majority of the stories appeal to a reader, that's when something's been done right.

Among these gems, certain ones do stand out more than others. Terry Bisson's "Macs," where an inventive use of clones leads to Closure for the victims of a terrorist bombing. Elisabeth Malarte's "Evolution Never Sleeps," a story where all those cute fuzzy woodland animals stop being cute and start getting back some of their own. Robert Reed's cautionary fable about genetic engineering and the rights of our children, "Game of the Century." Gene Wolfe's fascinating homage to the works of R.A. Lafferty, "Has Anybody Seen Junie Moore?" Chris Lawson's "Written in Blood," where the truly devout take their religion to heart, quite literally. All these, and twenty more, demonstrate that as the times change and society evolves, we've barely scratched the surface of the field's potential.

All in all, *The Year's Best SF #5* is a worthy representative of the series, and it really does live up to its lofty claims. The stories you'll find collected within are definitely some of the best examples of science fiction from the previous year. Deciding what's best and what isn't is still the reader's prerogative, but for the purposes of displaying the true depths and potential of science fiction, this collection is highly recommended. It invokes that sense of wonder which is absolutely essential for a story to be successful. And since calling an anthology *The Year's Really Good Stories* would be self-defeating, we'll allow them the title of "Best" instead. So if you want to see what today's writers are capable of, check out this collection.

*The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus*, by Harry Harrison  
Tor, 269 pages, \$6.99  
ISBN 0-812-57535-0

I grew up on the adventures of Jim DeGriz, the infamous Stainless Steel Rat. A futuristic combination of Raffles, Thomas Crown, and James Bond, he's long combined daring-do and thievery in a universe that desperately needs the kind of chaos only he can bring to it. Several steps ahead of the law at all times, and clever enough to outsmart himself on occasion, the so-called Stainless Steel Rat has evolved from a simple high-tech swashbuckling thief to a part-time secret agent, married with children (now adults) and occasional savior of the universe. But has he evolved too far?

I can still remember the sheer fun of the first book, *A Stainless Steel Rat Is Born*, which was my introduction to the series. Something just seemed to click in the amoral adventures of this devil-may-care adventurer, for whom thievery was a calling, not a job. Eagerly, I sought out the rest of the series, learning that I'd actually come in late to the party; Slippery Jim was already a part-time secret agent in the first book, married by the second book, married with kids soon after. Nevertheless, this didn't spoil my fun. I followed him as he traveled back in time, overthrew dictators, ran for President, and so on. Now, in his tenth book, the Stainless Steel Rat embarks upon another great adventure. He joins the circus.

The circus? Yes. Undercover, with the aid of his wife and kids, to unravel the mystery behind a series of daring bank robberies, on behalf of one of the universe's richest, oldest men. And because this is a Jim DeGriz story, nothing goes as planned, and everyone's hiding a secret or three, from the strong man to the circus owner to the bearded lady. Pretty soon, Jim's on the run from the authorities, the circus, his employer, and committing the sort of crimes only he could get away with, all to clear his name and save his loved ones. In the end, of course, he gets away to steal another day.

Harrison has claimed that this actually will be the last in the Stainless Steel Rat

series, but that's not set in stone. The real question, though, is: is this a good place to leave off? I believe so. Over the course of nearly 40 years, Harrison has treated us to any number of Rat stories, all of which were good, even when they weren't outstanding. However, in *Circus*, it felt like he was running out of steam. The jokes were just a little weaker, the danger a little less threatening, and the plot relied on more than one coincidence. To fall into the elaborate trap set for him, Jim had to first go to great lengths to even see the cheese (so to speak), and it began to stretch credibility even more than one of this series normally does. This just didn't have the same strength or compelling nature of some of the others. Maybe we've just realized that the Rat is untouchable; you can beat him, imprison him, frame him, probably kill him, and he'll still escape unscathed and ride into the sunset with the loot.

I think Harrison had the right idea when he went back to write several prequels regarding the Rat's early adventures, before he got tangled up in marital bliss, family responsibility, and secret agent hijinks. If he does another Rat book, that's hopefully the route in which he'll go, as I feared *The Stainless Steel Rat Joins The Circus* just didn't live up to its potential. It's still an excellent book from a master of humorous science fiction, but by now I've come to expect a little more. By all means, check it out but I'd recommend finding some of the earlier books to familiarize yourself with the Rat beforehand.

*Partners in Necessity*, by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller

Meisha Merlin, 346 pages, \$20.00  
ISBN 1-892065-01-1

*Plan B*, by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller  
Meisha Merlin, 334 pages, \$14.00  
ISBN 1-892065-00-2

Twelve years ago, Sharon Lee and Steve Miller first introduced us to the Liadan Univers. It was a place filled with swashbuckling heroics, derring-do, semi-mystic mumbo-jumbo, political

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intrigue, romance blossoming in the face of danger, and all the well-worn comfortable trappings of space opera at its finest. They released three books, each better and more daring than the last, weaving a tapestry of Clan politics, alien enigmas, espionage, and danger. Then, cruelty of cruelties, they ended on something of a cliffhanger, due to low sales at the time. For over a decade, their fans have eagerly awaited the continuation of the Liadan saga, and the further exploration of the universe. What was *Plan B* all about? Would the protagonists of the assorted books ever actually meet each other onscreen? What would happen next? Luckily, thanks to Meisha Merlin, not only have the latter questions been answered, but the prayers of many a fan have been answered with the release of *Partners in Necessity*, a handsome omnibus collecting the first three books in the Liadan saga, and *Plan B*, the long-awaited fourth book.

The Liadan books center around two pairs of protagonists, and the extended Clan Korval to which they belong. As a Clan, Korval is one of the oldest and most distinguished components of the elf-like alien race known as Liad. However, unlike the other clans, Korval—known for their pilots and traders—also possesses liberal amounts of Terran (that's human) blood, something they're often looked down upon for. Nonetheless, they ply their way through space, and more often than not, trouble finds them.

In *Conflict of Honors*, Priscilla y Mendoza, a human with empathic and mystic abilities, finds herself betrayed and stranded on a far-distant planet, her ship long gone and her belongings missing. With little option left to her, she finds passage on the Liad ship, *Dutiful Passage*, captained by Shan yos' Galan. And although the two drive each other nuts, they can't ignore the bond that gradually forms between them. Both Clan rivalries and personal vendettas ultimately bring the *Dutiful Passage* and its crew into repeated conflict of varying natures with Priscilla's former ship, resulting in a final confrontation that

firmly forces her to establish her role in the universe. As she weathers one crisis after another with the aid of her new family, she discovers that maybe signing on with Clan Korval is a better option than anyone ever thought.

In *Agent of Change*, we meet Shan's brother, the dashing and deadly Val Con yos' Phelium, who's been coerced into working as a secret agent for the Liadan Department of the Interior. A chance meeting brings his life into collision with that of Miri Robertson, ex-soldier and ex-bodyguard, currently on the run from the Juntavas, a galaxy-wide criminal organization. One saved life rewards another, and the two end up on the run from just about everyone they know. Even the help of Val Con's "brother," Edger, one of an alien race fondly referred to as "Turtles," can't keep them completely safe. As Val Con and Miri escape one threat and another, they bond in unexpected ways. Which is good, because as the book ends, they only have each other to depend upon.

Their saga is continued in *Carpe Diem*. Stranded on an Interdicted planet, forced to go undercover as foreign refugees, Val Con and Miri struggle to stay alive and sane in a land threatened by possible invasion. Only their quick wits, an increasing grasp of the language, and their musical skills will get them by. Meanwhile, Shan and Priscilla, as well as Edger and his companions, as well as the Department of the Interior, are searching feverishly for the stranded pair. And not everyone has their best interests in mind. Then *Plan B* is invoked, and Clan Korval is thrown into chaos....

*Plan B*, the continuation of the saga, picks up with Korval in disarray, Val Con and Miri once again on the move, and their friends ever one step behind. A trip to meet Miri's long-lost family turns into all-out war when the alien Yxtrang invade. From there, it's a free-for-all as factions collide and agendas clash. Nothing's ever simple in the Liadan world. Not politics, not romance, and certainly not family.

A full discussion of the many complex characters, the multi-layered

Clan politics, or the engaging style of the authors would take up much more space than is available. Simply let it be known that Liadan is compelling space opera at its best, exciting and gripping, a roller-coaster ride of intrigue and interaction. The personalities are rich, the descriptions vivid, and the combat sharp.

My initial thought after finishing *Plan B* was that I wanted more, and I wanted it right now. I can only imagine how frustrating it must have been for those who had to wait a decade between books. Certainly, I couldn't get enough, especially of my own personal favorite character, Edger, the 900-year old "turtle" with a heart of gold and a streak of unusual (for his race) enthusiasm where his "family" is concerned. With a name longer than some books, and the ability to shatter crystal with his voice, and a genteel formality to him, he stole the show in every scene, and I found myself flipping forward to pick up his story at times. And to be honest, just about all of the main characters you'll meet in Liadan are as interesting. Val Con and Miri have a fascinating, often-amusing, often-touching relationship, and I audibly cheered when Shan and Priscilla stopped pushing each other away. As for Val Con's inspired treatment of a captured Yxtrang scout in *Plan B*... well, find out for yourself.

If you like space opera, and you like science fiction, you'll like Liadan. I'm happy to note that the occasional Liadan story may be found in *Absolute Magnitude*, and Meisha Merlin has plans for at least two more Liadan books within the next few years. So that well is far from dry. I recommend *Partners in Necessity* and *Plan B* as modern-day space opera with all the trimmings and all the spirit required for a read of the first caliber.

Review by Pam Meek

*Balance Point* by Kathy Tyers  
Ballantine, 333 pages, \$25.95  
ISBN 0-345-42857-9

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With *Balance Point*, Kathy Tyers introduces the newest installment of the never-ending series of The New Jedi Order. The New Jedi Order series opened with *Vector Prime* in the invasion of the Yuuzhan Vong, whose grisly culture believes in both a masochistic embrace of pain and a loathing of all machine technology, including droids. *Vector Prime* rocked the Star Wars universe with the death of Chewbacca, a lamentably written piece that killed off one of Star Wars' most beloved characters by having a moon fall on his head. Fortunately for all Star Wars lovers, the series immediately redeemed itself by introducing a sub series called Dark Tide, written by Michael Stackpole, veteran Star Wars author of the wildly popular X-Wing series. The first Dark Tide book is rapidly followed by the release of yet a second sub series entitled *Agents of Chaos*, by newcomer James Luceno. If all of this isn't complicated enough for you, insert *Balance Point*, which belongs to neither series, yet attempts to draw its characters not only from the events of both sub-series, but also the entire Star Wars universe. Unfortunately, *Balance Point* fails.

It's not from lack of trying. Overall, it's a well written book, and it's clear that Tyers has placed a great deal of effort into learning the events and characters of prior books. *Balance Point* has the redeeming characteristic of finally ending Jacen Solo's whining about his place in the universe. Although I appreciate teenage angst, this has been languishing for more than long enough, and I was glad to see it over. Character development is a good thing, and I looked eagerly for it elsewhere. Alas, *Balance Point* faithfully follows its assigned formula, and its end surprises no one.

The Star Wars universe suffers from a fatal flaw that is becoming more obvious; at 30+ books, many of them hardback, there aren't many who have read the entire series, let alone remember the events of every book. In addition, Star Wars has finally surrendered to

"Milking the Cash Cow." All prior books in this series follow the same plan and *Balance Point* is no different; Yuuzhan Vong out think New Republic. Vong win battle. Vong commit atrocity. Jedi find one piece of useful information. Lavishly described battle. New Republic either outright loses or pyrrhic victory. Vong advance. Vong commit atrocity. Heros disgraced. After six books-snore. Or was that moo?

### Reviews by John Deakins

*Spindle's End* by Robin McKinley  
G.P. Putman's Sons, 422 pages, \$19.95  
ISBN 0-399-23466-7

Robin McKinley has established herself as the mistress of the re-told fairy tale. Two of her previous books were based on alternate views of "Beauty and the Beast." She has revisited Robin hood and other legends, as well as producing novels set in her own fantasy universe.

Theoretically, *Spindle's End* is a retelling of "Sleeping Beauty." The bad news is, if no one had told you that this was a new version of the familiar classic, you might never have guessed. Many traditional elements have been replaced. The good news is, if no one had told you that this was a "Sleeping Beauty" re-tread, you might not have guessed, but you would have enjoyed the story immensely.

Ms. McKinley overcomes the "re-telling" dilemma by retaining enough "Sleeping Beauty" skeleton to satisfy the purist, while adding enough new flesh to make *Spindle's End* a story of its own. Sleeping Beauty's kingdom is a land so steeped in magic that the very dust is unpredictable. Water dwellers are positively dangerous. Usually, magicians are male academicians, while day-to-day magic is handled by female fairies. Fairies are as common and as necessary as dentists.

Of course, there is an evil fairy who curses the royal daughter on her naming day. Of course, she is hidden by good fairies to avoid the fatal spindle. However, for every Disney-style wall of

thorns, there is a sentient castle. For every handsome prince (in disguise) there is a surprising blacksmith. For every predictable spell, there is the unpredictability of talking animals.

Though most fantasy description quickly palls, McKinley's asides are one of the most enjoyable parts of the book. Fairy day-care centers, which foster babies until they outgrow their wild magic, make perfect sense when she explains it.

There are two magical tricks to escape pursuing evil. There are noble dukes and beleaguered queens, proud horses and mistaken identities, friendships and loves, and it all turns out right in the end (even if you didn't see that end coming.) You're gonna love it.

*Venus* by Ben Eova  
Tor Books, 347 pages, \$24.95  
ISBN 0-312-87216-X

A long excerpt from *Venus* appeared in a competing SF magazine (which shall remain nameless). That condensed story was, in fact, pretty good, but if you read it, stop there. There isn't enough meat in the rest of the book to sustain you.

The protagonist, Van Humphries, is a sickly second son, hated by his aggressive billionaire father. He is driven through economic necessity (?) to recover the body of his beloved older brother (?) from furnace-hot, lifeless Venus, at the head of a Scientific (?) expedition. The reader is never once convinced of those motives.

The author's "surprise" curves in the story-line lets the reader "cut across" with little effort. Surprise! There's life on Venus! Surprise! Everyone on Van's first downed ship are killed except, conveniently, himself and his future love-interest. Surprise! There's more life on Venus!

When the vicious microbes of the Venusian atmosphere destroy his ship, Van is rescued by Captain Fuchs, a cardboard Captain Nemo, who is (Surprise!) his real father.

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The interesting action/adventure of the first chapters shouldn't play out after Van is forcibly recruited as a crewman of the second ship. There are murder, attempted mutiny, and dangerous, dangerous Venus held at bay only by unpredictable machinery. There are volcanic eruptions, hostile life-forms, and a solo jaunt to the glowing surface. The interpersonal tension between Van, the girl (Marguerite), and Captain Fuchs is theoretically exciting. Nevertheless, you'll find yourself finishing this book because you committed yourself to read it, not because you care how it (Surprise!) comes out.

Bova moves his characters like plastic chessmen, from plot contrivance to plot contrivance. Their plight, and their ultimate survival or death, fizzles instead of sizzles. The "science" in his science fiction is very good, but like the movie special effects on *Starship Troopers*, you keep hoping a real story will peek out from behind it.

Let it go.

*The Master of All Desires* by Judith Merkle Riley  
Viking Penguin, 400 pages,  
\$14.00 ISBN 0-140-29552-0

What a marvelous book! If you are an Anglophile (as I am), a novel set in France already has a strike against it. The name of Nostradamus on the jacket causes the word "tabloid" to leap to mind. Catherine de Medici? Wasn't she a queen in some century past? Henri II of France, or the various Francis, Louiss, and other Henris for that matter? Who cares about French kings from God-only-knows how long ago.

You will.

Ms. Riley presents you a piece of French history that altered the entire world—alive with the marvels of human intrigue, ingenuity, deceit, love, and rampant foolishness. Never mind who won what battle, when. Not one battle appears on stage; instead there is a flurry of interpersonal love potions, poisons, duels, misfiring flintlocks, lies, and horoscopes. The characters (like human beings) sometimes think about money

ahead of love, appearance ahead of money, and self-enlargement above all.

Characters see no conflict between religion one hand and sorcery, astrology, and assassination on the other. Riley captures that medieval French dichotomy perfectly. Her heroine Sibille virtuously (and believably) survives a blizzard of attacks through unpretentious strength of mind. Everyone, it seems, wants the cursed, undying sorcerer's head, the Master of All Desires, which she accidentally controls.

The book is also the ultimate Three Wishes Gone Wrong story, since the death-head will grant every wish to hang the wisher with a self-woven rope. We, through Nostradamus and his angelic muse, can see beyond the book's slice of history. The conniving Queen Catherine would mastermind the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of a hundred thousand Protestants under a flag of truce, and every child of hers would reign and die in poisoned misery. Nevertheless, there is an acceptable happy ending for the protagonists and for gouty, manipulative Nostradamus.

The French names are sometimes tedious, but the book is not. Enjoy it.

Review by Joe Lazzaro

*Frequency Magazine*  
PO Box 2711  
Venice, CA 90294

<http://www.frequencymagazine.com>

While at the 2000 World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago, I discovered a new SF magazine, one different from most of the other periodicals.

*Frequency* is an audio magazine, published quarterly on compact disk. Because I am visually impaired, I do most of my reading with audio books and on the web, so *Frequency* was a natural. But this magazine is not necessarily aimed at subscribers with visual or other disabilities, but rather the mainstream public. *Frequency* is a good sign in the publishing game, as it encourages magazines to provide their

wares in so called alternative formats. *Frequency* can be read using a standard CD player, or a PC with a CD-ROM drive, sound card, and speakers.

The first issue remains impressive. I do not say this lightly. Each story is a Hugo nominee, and all are expectedly good. I won't spend a lot of time describing each story in detail, but here's an overview.

The first story (and my favorite) remains "Ancient Engines" by Michael Swanwick. The piece takes place in a brass and wood bar, and discusses immortality, about a cyborg that lusts to live forever, and the old man who tells him how to do it, and how much hard work it will be. The story is what SF is all about, showing the long view of the future often absent from most stories. "Macs" by Terry Bisson shows a world where victims families have the right to brutally kill clones of their loved-one's murderer. It's a violent story about the people who got closure, and some one regretted that they had. The Hugo winner is "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" by Michael Swanwick, about a man corrupted by the time travel tourism industry, forced to choose among two possible futures of good versus evil. "Sarajevo" by Nicholas DiChario is a well crafted piece that plucks your heart-strings with family ties against the backdrop of total, senseless warfare revisited. "Hothouse Flowers" by Mike Resnick explores death and dying in a world where life support can keep you alive indefinitely, but in a vegetative state—except for one patient who isn't.

In strictly audio production terms, *Frequency* is competently engineered with complementary sound effects and music. The effects are not as rich as those heard on an "old time radio" show, but they work. There were some technical glitches, several spots of sharp static during playback, but even with these minor annoyances, I enjoyed reading the magazine on my ten-year old Yamaha while I cooked a bacon and eggs heart attack breakfast.

*Frequency* is accepting submissions from freelancers. The author guidelines

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and more are at [www.frequencymagazine.com](http://www.frequencymagazine.com). The magazine is encouraging stories that will work well in an audio format. Send submissions to their email box at [editor@frequencymagazine.com](mailto:editor@frequencymagazine.com). A one year, 6 issue subscription is \$40.00, \$30.00 off the cover price of \$9.95 per volume.

All in all, I enjoyed *Frequency*, and am looking forward to future issues, and I didn't take a bribe for saying that! In fact, I had to pay for the magazine out of pocket, as my expense account with DNA Publications has mysteriously lapsed as of late. But, I don't regret for a minute parting with my Beer Money for a good SF magazine.

## Letters Page

Dear Warren,

I read your editorial in *Absolute Magnitude* Issue #13, and in an attempt to support the genre, I went out and bought the May and June issues of Asimovs.

I think I spotted the problem: these are NOT SCIENCE FICTION STORIES!! The first story, "Going After Bobo," may be a nice story, but it belongs in *Reader's Digest* or *Saturday Evening Post*, or something, but pray tell me what about that makes it a science fiction story? inserting a pellet under the skin of a pet? drop by your local vet and he can do that RIGHT NOW! GPS surveillance? check out [terraser.com](http://terraser.com) and tell me that can't be done RIGHT NOW!! It's just not science fiction! How about the next story? "The Elephants on Neptune" SOUNDS like a science fiction story, but it's just stupid. I know, it's trying to be quirky and in a magazine filled with top notch SF, maybe it would be, but this is not the kind of story. I buy SF magazines to read. Next up is "Requiem Antarctica." I thought maybe we were going to get somewhere, there were a great number of possibilities as to why the Doctor wouldn't reveal what happened, but what do we get? A

VAMPIRE story! Argh! That's not science fiction, it's a horror story!! Hello? Go read *Weird Tales* if that's what you like, but what's that story doing in a science fiction magazine? Yes, the story on page 63 is, by anybody's definition, a science fiction story, but why do I have to struggle 63 pages in to get to it?? And, yes, "Merlin's Gun" on page 68 is an absolutely top-rate outstanding story, the kind I want to read, and made the whole effort worthwhile. But taken as whole, I have to say the magazine didn't provide me the experience I thought I was going to have, and certainly neither issue I bought made me want to jump up and get the next issue when it's available. (Compare this to *AbsMag* where we're off and running on page 3, with a story that is science fiction from the first paragraph: "...please God, let me keep this form." Halleluluyah!)

Anyway, just some thoughts. Keep up the good work!

Ace McInturff  
Sequim, WA 98382

—Thank for the vote of confidence, Ace, I'll try to keep the SF stories coming.

Warren,

I just wanted to say thank you, and let you know how much I have enjoyed the Summer 2000 issue of *AM*.

I was pleased (and a little surprised) to find Cecilia Tan's "In Silver A" tucked in the middle of your magazine. It seems that the visions of the future presented by many science fiction writers don't include much room for so-called "alternative" sexualities. As a gay man, it was refreshing to read a story where the protagonist is not in a traditional heterosexual relationship, and where his sexuality is not really the focus of the story—merely a fact of life.

I also appreciate your stated commitment to the Science Fiction field and your inclusion of Harlan Ellison's "3 Explicit Essays" full of tips for novice writers on how to produce "ass kicking fiction." I think that articles like this are important for the health of the field—particularly if authors' avenues of publication keep drying up the way they have in recent years.

Consider my subscription in the mail. Thanks again for such a wonderful magazine.

Joseph Geierman

*Joseph, I think the future will be a very big place and will have enough room for everyone. I believe in inclusion, and my story choices reflect that.*

Dear Warren Lapine:

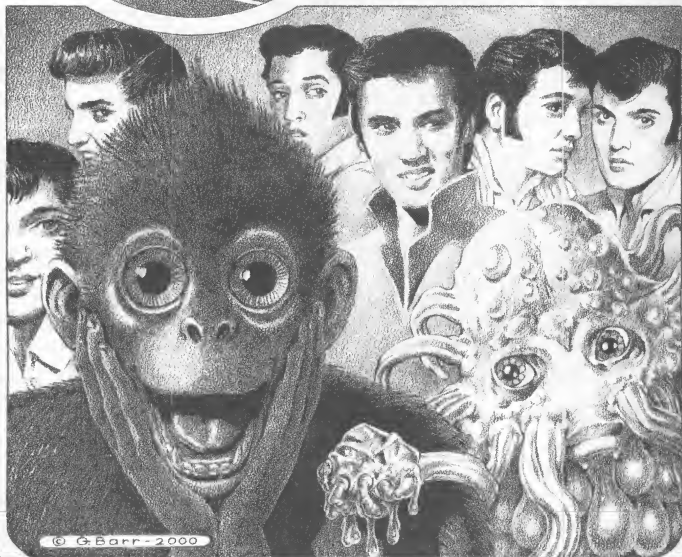
I wanted to take a moment to congratulate DNA Publications on its quest to offer the very best in science fiction, horror, fantasy, and similar fiction to an audience that recognizes the mainstay power of small press. I remember only months ago, strolling through the aisle of an out-of-the-way book store that I discovered issue #13 of *Absolute Magnitude*. Taken by the size and quality of the mag at first glance, I picked it up, thumbed through it rather rapidly, and realized that had a familiar flavor of originality.

I took it home; read it once, then twice, and found myself sitting at my computer writing again. I'm not sure what happened but that feeling of making wishes and dreams come from the ground up sparked my creative innards and sent me on journey I haven't left. Although I must cut this short, I must say that the I am addicted to *Absolute Magnitude* and you will be hearing more from me later.

Farewell and thanks!

John Valdez





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# Invisible Friends

(or, A Boy and His Dog, Some Monkeys, Walking Fish and a Few Damned Aliens)  
by Steve Sawicki

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Subject: Re: Weekend Plans  
Date: Thur, 8 Apr, 1999, 12:32:01-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike:

Things have been more or less well here, although I won't be able to join you this weekend as planned. I'm buried in stress at the moment and really need to find some extra cash fast. You know why. Dammit, she's makin' me nuts. Can't believe it's going to cost me so much. Didn't cost anywhere near this much to get involved in the first place. Should be the other way around. In any case, I need cash bad. Turns out the local university is in need of subjects for a medical study they are doing. I called and they want me to come in this weekend. Some kind of brain study thing. I'll do some Spect scans and an MRI. I think they shoot you with radiation too. Plus they want me to take this new drug—really tiny doses so it's no big deal, I guess. Best part is that it pays almost \$500. Can you believe it? \$500 for four visits. And they do these things all the time. If I can do like 6 studies it will be a big help. Won't have to kill the bi... well I better not say since you never know where email goes.

Hey, I have to tell you. Had a weird experience just a little while ago. Had to go get milk and decided to take the dog for a ride. She loves the car. Hanging her head out and all. Makes the door all slimy though. Anyway, as I'm passing the local produce stand, the one just before the car dealer, I see a big sign by the road advertising BANAMAS. I should have stopped but decided it was probably just some moron who didn't know how to spell. I don't know why we bother writing some times. Saw a big shooting star on the way home too, probably a meteorite since I think it hit. Was pretty close. Maybe it was an alien ship entering the atmosphere, ha, wouldn't that be a pisser, make all that science fiction just so much wrong bad literature. Which reminds me. WTBS is running a B-movie SciFi weekend so I'll be watching lots of old films. Good thing since I can't afford videos. Let me know how the trip goes. Sorry I can't make it. Maybe next time.

Subject: Lost Weekend  
Date: Sun, 11 Apr, 1999, 19:02:21-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike

I'm whipped. Must be the radiation. Weird shit, blue glow and all. Tech handled it with these thick gloves. Like

something right out of one of your books. Really knocked me out too. They stuck this long catheter into one of my arm veins and then attached this connector thing so they could shoot stuff in and take blood out without pricking me every time. All so they could just have a tech do it instead of a nurse. Damn thing hurt the whole time, like having a hot wire stuck inside your vein. Except, of course when they shot in the radiation, then it was like a cold wave enveloping your arm. Really, really odd feeling that.

Well, glad to hear the trip went well. Wish I had been there. Double header too. Weird that you saw a meteorite on the way back though. Dog says hello. I'm really bushed. Going to bed. Long day tomorrow and they want me back tomorrow night for the second part of all this. More radiation. Another catheter. Joy.

Subject: Monkey C:/  
Date: Mon, 12 Apr, 1999, 23:32:51-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

I'm really pissed at the monkeys for tinkering with my system and screwing up my email (they lost part of January, all of February, the odd days in March and the Mondays in April.) Granted they did fix that nasty problem with Netscape by figuring out how to switch from the 16 bit to the 32 bit Netscape 4.04, but still, I had important mail tucked in there that I had not read yet. Wait, they said, we can fix. We did a back up, says they. Yeah, right. Now I know monkeys are smart but even humans don't do back ups so I figured they were just trying to find some way to get back at me for yelling at them. I told them I did not think they would ever get to use my system again. Wait, they said, you won't let us play with your system because you are afraid of losing more junk mail and maybe a game or two? Shakespeare let us write plays for him, they said in closing, and you are worried about offers for cybersex? Well, how can you argue with that logic, especially when it comes from a monkey. So, bottom line is, I let them into the system and, after much hooting, parasite eating and some scratching, they managed to fix everything.

Hey, the monkeys said Shakespeare. I wonder if they wrote the tragedies? Maybe I'll see if they can cobble together a story or two. Maybe something for Analog?

Subject: Monkey Tales  
Date: Tue, 13 Apr, 1999, 6:23:41-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net



# Absolute Magnitude

To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike

I thought I had explained the monkeys but perhaps not. Remember when I said I needed to raise a considerable (for me) sum of cash in the next few months? Well I still do but I also can't just stay home with the monkeys all the time either. This is why I went out to the discount movie theater tonight to see a cheap showing of "The Big Lebowski." I left the monkeys home because I was pretty sure there were no simians in the film. The movie, by the way, is a terrible waste of film and I would have walked out but for two bucks you really can't complain. Talk about a film that goes nowhere. This movie had more dead ends than an old rat finds in a sadistic psychiatrists memory maze. Sure it had big name actors, and sure they acted like they had big names, but it was all pissing in the wind. Felt good for that brief second before you realized that you were not by the ocean and that salt spray could mean only one thing. Yes, there were a few very funny parts. Yes, nihilists did play a major part in the film and where else are you going to see that? Yes, Steve Buscemi was his great comedic self and was the best part of the film too. True, John Goodman had his moments. Still, the plot swisscheesed its way from beginning to end by lurching from bit to bit and joke to joke. Saw the film with 10 other people in the audience and besides a few titters (pair of college girls two seats down and one row up) the crowd remained silent. But that's neither here nor there and we were talking about raising cash, not spending it.

To do this I have been doing a few things no one seems to have expected—selling off books, hiring myself out as an on-line focus groupie, doing some PR work for the local country music station, and doing some medical research (as a test subject, not as a researcher). In any case it was during my last visit to the nuclear medicine wing at Yale where they wanted to once again inject me with radioactive fluids and run Spect scans in order to test a new psychotropic medicine, that I ran into the monkeys. Now, most research subjects get paid in cash but maybe they just liked my face or maybe they thought I'd be an easy target because of my human service work, but they started telling me the tale of their monkeys and how the poor things were no longer useful and were going to be put down. They told me what wonderful house pets monkeys make and would I be interested in taking them. I refused out of hand. First, I know that monkeys piss and poop everywhere. Second, I'm not inclined to just bring home any strange monkey, regardless of its contribution to science. And, third, the damned aliens would have a fit. So, we do the injecting and the glowing and the scanning and the setting off of alarms and all the other stuff that goes with medical testing and they then lead me to a room in the basement and leave me. Sure enough, it's the monkey room. I'm dead inclined to just ignore the pathetic looking things and doing an excellent job when one of them creeps an arm out of the cage and gestures me to come close.

"Hey, pal, you look like an intelligent guy, c'mere," the monkey says, pissing on his cell mate.

I ignored him, studiously focusing on the clock which had started shifting positions on the wall.

"Hey, pal, you look like a writer," the monkey continued. "We could help."

Sure, I thought, who wouldn't be attracted by the thought of all that free parasite picking, but, still, there were too many unknowns.

"Look," the monkey said, flinging a handful of dung against the wall. "We could do the d-udge work for you. The review work you hate. Fantasy trilogies. New lesbian authors. Harlan Ellison. We'll do it for..."

"... yeah," I finally could remain silent no longer. "Peanuts."

"Gees, bud, you're thinking of elephants."

"Oh," I said. "So what do you want?"

"Computer time."

"Yeah, right," I said, "like you guys know how to work computers."

"Hey, pal," the monkey squatted, grabbing the cage with his fingers, "who do you think wrote all those Ellwood anthologies in the 60's? Who do you think ran all those spaceships before Glenn and his crybabies got their way?"

Well, sure, I thought, put that way it made a lot of sense.

So, now you know how the monkys came to be trying to solve my Netscape problems.

Now, if I can only get them to explain to me why every time I start my web browser some guy named Mark Johnson wants a cookie.

Subject: Grease Monkeys

Date: Tue, 13 Apr, 1999, 19:18:11-0400

From: Steve Sawicki

<dammaliens@earthling.net

To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike

You're still confused about things? Thought I'd explained it all last time. Well, let me think back and maybe that will help. Last time though, friends are expected to listen when one's life tale is being spouted out. If you can't keep up then you'll just have to be confused.

The medical research. Yes, it is true. Pays pretty good money. Of course, the best money is in organs. They wanted to give me \$3,800 for a liver. I considered it but then I figured I still had many exciting things planned for me and my liver so had to turn them down. That's how I ended up in the radiation experiment. Something to do with aspirin and memory. I forget exactly what at the moment. Now you might think I got the radiation because I failed to agree to an organ experiment. Not true, as the monkeys have told me. It's a lot more random than you'd like to think. So much for the scientific method. In any case, the monkeys and I were out for a joy ride the other day (I can't leave them at home because

## Invisible Friends

the damned aliens just get too many weird ideas, not that they don't get weird ideas on a regular basis anyway, with or without the monkeys, but I like to prevent the really odd ones from coming to any kind of fruition) and the car was sputtering like it has been. Hey, it's an old car so what do you expect. The monkeys were sure they could fix it. Couple of plugs, some new wires, a distributor rotor, an interocetor and everything would be fine. Now, I'm not inclined to let just any idiot work on my car. It is after all something that I entrust my life to, but the monkeys convinced me they knew what they were doing by demonstrating on a Toyota Tercel in the K-Mart parking lot. It's pretty incredible how quickly one of those comes apart. In any case, after this feat of mechanical deconstructionism, I was convinced. We stopped at Napa and got some plugs, some wires, some bananas and some interocetor parts, then traveled home. The monkeys went straight to work while I checked out the mail. Surprisingly, besides the usual assortment of bills, bugs, slugs and body parts I found an acceptance letter from Eternity along with a contract. This means that you can all look forward to reading a short story of mine sometime in October. And don't be cheap bastards and ask to read my copy. If the monkeys support my writing you should too. The damned aliens steal their copies but what do you expect from an advanced culture that no longer has money or pudding. So, the monkeys are tinkering with the car and I'm reading the mail when the local gendarmerie want to know what the monkeys are doing.

"Tune up," I reply

"Do you have a permit?" the nice officer asks.

"To get my car tuned?"

"To have monkeys."

"Well, they're not really mine, they belong to the hospital."

The officer had no response except to start getting out of the car.

"I got them the last time I was there to get irradiated."

"You got some kind of strange disease?" He said, getting back into the car.

"Why? Don't I look well?"

"You look fine," he said, "Quite attract . . ."

"Hey! Hey! Not in front of the monkeys."

"Look," he said, closing the door. "I'll let it go this time but if I stop again those monkeys better have licenses."

As he drove off I could not help but wonder that if the DMV went a bit off when I brought the dog through for a learning permit, how would they respond to the monkeys?

So, now you are up to speed on why the dog gets to drive, why the monkeys watch so much television and why the aliens are huddled in the basement. One more radiation experiment to go. At least I think I only have one. They've promised me that this is the one where I get the super powers. Hope I get something good and not something stupid like spider sense or the ability to flame on or something like that.

Till next time, I remain your friend



# Absolute Magnitude

Date: Tue, 13 Apr, 1999, 23:56:01-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike

"I have a message for you," one of the monkeys said to me today.

"Put it on the table," I said, pointing to the clutter of catalogs, editorial requests and chain letters.

"It's from God."

"Yeah, okay, put it on the table. I need to finish this Jerry Springer episode. It's about hookers who used to be editors and the writers who are now their pimps. Talk about irony."

"No, seriously, he's very concerned."

"Don't you mean she? God is supposed to be a female in these kind of revelations. Or sometimes an alien which would be an it or some other gender neutral term."

"God is male. Honest."

The intensity in the monkey's voice made me hit the mute button.

"Okay, shoot with the message."

"You're doing it all wrong."

"What, listening?"

"No," the monkey shook its head and then stopped to eat a few of the fleas or whatever other parasitical creature inhabits monkey fur before continuing. "That's the message."

"Not much of a message."

"Frankly, God does not consider you guys to be much of a creation. You don't get much right."

"Hey, I know you're talking about the war thing and slavery and man's inhumanity to man and, okay, woman too, but you have to consider art and charity and social consciousness, and all of the good things."

"No, I don't. My only considerations are how much more computer time I have coming, how to hide from the damned aliens and wondering if there's enough bananas in the fridge to last until you go shopping next. You can never have enough bananas you know. Oh, and hoping those interocetor parts arrive soon so we can get your car fixed better. The dog keeps complaining that it sputters during double clutching."

"Please, the dog does not know how to double clutch. She's got paws for God's sake. She can't even drive the car unless I start it first, so don't give me that."

"Well, God just wanted you to know."

"Why me? Hey, he's not thinking of making me a new prophet or anything, is he? My friends will probably really hate that. Don't most friends of prophet's die first?"

"I don't know, I'm just relaying a message."

"Does God talk to you a lot?"

"Define a lot."

"More than every other day."

"No, not a lot."

"Oh, okay. Does he want an answer?"

"No."

"So, that's it? We're doing it all wrong? That's the message? No other news? No threats? No warnings? No tingly spidey sense as a bonus?"

"Maybe you should ask the aliens."

"No! I'm pissed at the damned aliens right now. Do you know they were trying to turn the furnace into some sort of anti-matter incinerator?"

"Actually, yes, they wanted to borrow our banana peels. Frankly, the peel is the best part. Um, I don't know if you've noticed or not but some of us are missing."

"You think the damned aliens ate your . . . what exactly were they? parents? siblings? buddies?"

"Huddle mates. And I think they used them to see if they'd power the ram scoop better than fanzines."

"Oh, yeah, they're really fixated on that ram scoop. They throw all kinds of things into it. Well, I'll talk to them about it."

"Thanks. Don't forget about the message."

"Yeah, right. Like I got nothing better to do than play with riddles from God. Put it over there next to that rejection from Analog."

"Okay."

"Hey, look at that. Isn't that Gardner Dozois next to Jerry? Naw, maybe not, Gardner's not that thin."

"I'm going to the garage."

"What's in the garage? What are you guys up to now?"

"We're fixing the lawnmower."

"The lawnmower's not broke."

"Um, yes it is."

"How?"

"We were experimenting with how best to shave the cat."

"Oh, man, use the electric hedge trimmers next time. Cat hair really dulls the blade and binds the rotor. You can freeze the engine that . . ."

"We'll be in the garage if you need us."

I watched the monkey turn to go.

"Hey," I called out after it.

The monkey turned.

"This God thing. Aren't we supposed to be clear with God? You know, ready for heaven just so long as we prepare and try to be good? After all, didn't Jesus die for our sins?"

The monkey fixed me with a long stare. "Actually, Jesus died because of your sins. Like God said, you guys tend to get it all wrong."

My eyes caught sight of what could only be Stanley Schmidt appearing on-stage wearing a tight little black number that showed off his legs in a fine fashion. I failed to hear the monkey leave.

Subject: An Interocetor For Monkey  
Date: Wed, 14 Apr, 1999, 7:00:35-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

## Invisible Friends

Mike

Strange things continue to happen. Perhaps when I go in for the next radiation test of the medical experiment I'm participating in I'll try to have a chat with the doctor. Hate to bother him since he's always apparently in the middle of someone, but, I'm starting to grow a bit concerned. For example, just yesterday, when I was out in the backyard hunting slugs with one of the damned aliens (and you know you have to be quite a shot just to be able to have some evidence you've actually hit them as they have a tendency to take direct hits rather splashingly) In any case, there we were, the damned alien and I, me with my ouzi and he with his alien zipper, taking aim on a particularly slimy and fat slug, when there arises a cacophony of barking and screeching from the garage. While monkeys and dogs get along most of the time they do have their moments. Leaving the slug to slime for another day, the damned alien and I headed off around the house. The reason for the excitement was obvious; the interocetor parts had finally arrived and the monkeys were just putting the finishing touches on the car. The dog was incredibly excited as she had wanted to go for a ride that morning and could not but now was hoping to tool out with the newly operating mobile.

Needless to say, I stepped in, and a few moments later, we were heading out for a test spin along with the best monkey mechanic, the dog and a single damned alien. I'm not sure which damned alien it was but from the length of the tentacles hanging out the window I think it was one of the older ones; Hummer maybe. The dog had her head out the opposite window and the monkey was somewhere on the floor of the front seat picking parasites and looking for change.

"Aha," the monkey said, crunching something and holding up a copper disk.

"Yeah," I took a quick glance, "That's a penny."

"But it's an old penny. Who knows how long it's been here. It could be worth lo's. Maybe one of the builders left it," the monkey said, polishing it on its fur.

"Um, yeah, but this is a 1989 Camaro so it can't be that old."

"I will treasure it forever," the monkey said, looking for a pocket to stick it in and finally just sliding it into its mouth.

"You do that. In fact, consider it payment for fixing the car."

It was at this point that the dog decided she wanted to drive and started banging me in the back of the head with her nose.

"Stop that," I reached back to slap her and hit the damned alien instead. My hand came away covered with spooze.

"You want this?" I said, carefully waving my hand towards the back of the car.

"No," the alien said. "Enjoy."

"Thanks," I looked at the spooze clinging to my fingers then turned to the monkey. "You?"

"I brought bananas."

"Great." There was only one option left.

"Hey look!" I said, pointing to the right and behind. "There's Hank Aaron."

All three turned to look (the dog does not really know who Hank Aaron is but will follow a lead well given). While they turned I vigorously shook my hand out the window, spooze blowing off in chunks and tendrils.

"We acquired one, you know," the damned alien turned back just as I brought my hand back inside.

"Acquired one? Hank Aaron? A person? You can't do that, even if you are from an advanced culture."

"No, we bought a baseball team."

"You did?"

"The Stinsincity Stinkies," the monkey said.

The dog barked.

"What, everyone knows but me? Where's Stinsincity?"

"Oklahoma," the monkey said.

"How do you know that?"

"We did research there. Plus it was part of our astronaut training," the monkey went back to grooming.

"Tell me about baseball," the damned alien said.

"Well," I said, trying to think since I'm much more a football fan. "It's a game . . ."

"The national past time," the monkey said.

The dog barked.

"Um, yeah, it is. It takes two teams . . ."

"Nine men each, one pitcher, one catcher, three basemen, one short stop, three outfielders."

"Yeah, well, you left out the umpires."

"They're not on the team," the monkey said.

"Still, you need them for the game."

"Why are there Canadian teams on the American League?" the alien asked, flapping its tentacles at a bus full of children and don't you know how much trouble that will get you into even if they are high schoolers.

"Because they're from North America."

"Then why aren't there Japanese teams on the National League?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Baseball," the monkey said, "tell him."

"Um, well, I don't really know. I think because we invented baseball and the Japanese invented, um, well, manners, I think."

"This is very complicated," the alien said, waving all three sets of tentacles over its head.

"Not really, and surely an advanced culture such as yours has comparable games it plays?"

"We're not really game players, you know. Senseless waste of energy. We do enjoy watching your people run around though."

"So, if you are not all that enamored of the sport, why did you buy a team?"

"We thought it would be an excellent avenue to acquire cereal and meat by-products at a reduced rate."

"You bought a baseball team so you could get hot dogs cheaper?"

## Absolute Magnitude

The damned aliens answer was cut off by the siren wail of a state police vehicle. While it is true I had been traveling a bit over the posted limit I could only assume it was the tenstacle incident which had attracted them. For a moment I considered switching places with the dog but then I remembered how much she hated getting tickets.

"Hey, alien," I said, slowing down and pulling over. "Since you are from such an incredibly advanced race surely by now you've discovered the way to get out of the trouble our present situation will create?"

"Absolutely."

"Excellent," I said, not quite believing that for once my luck had changed and I would not have to spend time explaining why the only one in the car with a valid license was the dog, why the monkey had decided right now was time to repair the heater core and why the damned alien now had all four complete sets of tentacles in one of its mouths. "What's the secret?" I asked as the cop got out of the patrol car.

"We pay the tickets."

Subject: Monkeydoo  
Date: Wed, 14 Apr, 1999,  
14:14:41-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike

Things have finally started to return to normal. Yesterday, I was pacing the living room, proof reading my latest short story—the third installment of my Blinkie in Space Series; Blinkie Goes Blind (Don't forget to read the first two, Blinkie Gets Blintzes, Blinkie Graduates Mandatory Driving School and look for the next in the series Blinkie Goes Blonde!) when my foot struck something, sending whatever it was shooting across the floor and under the couch. It felt heavy. I would have left it but the damned alien sitting in the plant by the sliding doors started looking real guilty.

"What have you done?" I asked it.

"Nothing. Well, added a bit of nitrogen to the potting soil here but otherwise, nothing."

I stared at it, squinty eyed. This often works with the damned aliens since for them it signifies a reverential inquiry from a beloved elder. Of course if you get the squint wrong it means come get me I'm ready to be your dinner. I evidently was way off since the damned alien just sat there, bubbling spooze from its orifices and humming into the dirt. I crossed the room and knelt by the couch, reaching underneath and feeling for the kicked object. I felt enough cat hair to make two cats and since I owned none I could only assume the damned aliens had been continuing with their cat shaving

experiments. I'd asked them to use the garage but they have these strange ideas about place and task. Cat shaving evidently needs to be done in the living room. My hand finally closed on a lumpy object and I grasped it. I pulled my arm free and rose, studying the twisted shape.

"Is this part of a cat?" I asked the potted damned alien.

"No. Most definitely not."

"Aha," I pounced. "So you have done something." I shook the thing with vigor, finally noticing that it was too big to be a cat paw. Just the right size for a . . ."

"It's Phil," said the monkey standing in the doorway.

"Yikes!" I jolted, flinging the paw across the room.

The monkey moved to where the paw had fallen and picked it up. "Phil really liked you, that's no way to treat him."

"Or what's left of him," said the damned alien.

"Gees, what happened?"

"The aliens," the monkey said, moving to where I stood. "Here," he held out the paw, "Phil would have wanted you to have this."

"Why?" I stared at the shriveled and clawed thing.

The monkey shrugged. "Phil was like that, always giving."

"And you," I turned to the alien.

"What's your involvement in all of this?"

"I had nothing to do with it. I was holding a foot."

"They scooped him," the monkey said, hanging the paw by its claws from my jeans pocket.

I moved closer to the alien. "Dammit, I thought I told you guys no more live organic matter in the ram scoop."

"We believed we had finally figured out the conversion factors for flesh."

"Gees," I said. "Sometimes you guys really scare me. Couldn't you try to find some way to utilize something toxic instead?"

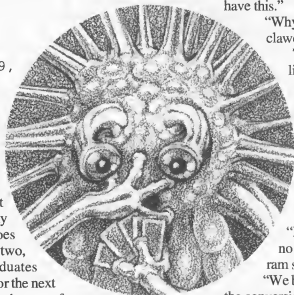
"We could," the alien said, "But errors in calibration might render the planet lifeless. I'll check with the others but I'm pretty sure their fondness for lettuce precludes our taking such drastic action."

While the alien spoke my hand dropped to my side and started rubbing the paw.

"Hey, how did this get so shriveled and dry so quickly?" I asked, taking a moment to study the shrunken claws and palm.

The monkey picked parasites, moving its attention from me to the alien to its crunchly lunch.

The alien settled itself deeper into the plant. "We took the opportunity to study one of your major religions in more detail."



## Invisible Friends

"Major religion?" I looked at the paw. "We don't have a major religion that . . ."

"Voodoo," the monkey chimed in. "Want a flea?"

"No thanks," I waved the offer off. "Voodoo is not a major religion. It involves raising the dead, ritual sacrifice, drinking blood and sticking pins in dolls."

"Yes," the alien agreed. "Much like your Christianity. We were struck by the similarities."

"Similarities? There are no similarities!"

"No?" The alien pursed two of its major orifices in thought. "Does not your Christianity involve sacrificial lambs and scapegoats?"

"Well yes, but . . ."

"And does not your Christianity have, as its major icon, a man stuck with nails?"

"You can't equate . . ."

"And does not your Christianity involve weekly rituals of blood drinking and flesh chewing?"

"The wine and wafer are representational of . . ."

"And did not your Jesus raise the dead and, in fact rise, himself?"

"Well, yes, he did but it was through an act of God that those miracles happened."

"Neither the manner of the ritual nor the individuals invoked are as important as the results," the alien said, "and besides, you people place all too much importance in rituals. There is only one way to make water but we can show you hundreds of different rituals involving the process."

"I don't think you guys spending another weekend drinking beer in the basement counts as teaching me your advanced versions of the scientific method."

"We have learned much in your basement."

"I am sure," I said, turning to the monkey. "And you, how can you let them keep doing stuff to you?"

The monkey paused, crunched a couple of fleas, then scratched his privates. "We are genetically disposed to following the direction of an advanced culture."

"You mean you do it just because they tell you to?"

"Basically," the monkey scratched harder.

"And," I slowly said as lightbulbs started going off, "the same applies to us?"

"Most of the time," the monkey went back to picking fleas using the same hand. "There were some years where we could not convince ourselves that you were more advanced than us of course, but barring those, yes."

"I see," I said, scratching myself. "So that explains . . ."

"Yes," the monkey said, "Zoos, the space program and most of the Tarzan movies."

"... Tarzan movies?"

"You don't really think Cheetah would have worked with Weismuller otherwise, do you?"

<damnaliens@earthling.net  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

Listen to this! I had to get out and wouldn't you know it, but I can't even get away from myself. It's all becoming just too weird. Is it me? Or is it that the world has grown very strange very quickly. The world I think. So, I went out.

Courtney, the attractive and well built bartender, although everything considered, well built is probably not accurate since if you could build them, I'd be busy constructing them in the basement faster than monkeys make poop. Of course, product testing would be a priority. Of course, as well, I'd have to convince the damn aliens to move their stuff to the attic. I'd use the attic myself but you know how quickly heat spoils flesh. Not that the damp, moldy basement, which is perfect for alien technology evidently, does not create its own problems. Of course, yet again, we're dealing with impossibilities and you know how grounded I am in reality. I'm just not sure which. We're all pretty grounded in fact, although I wonder about the dog at times.

"What can I get you?" Courtney breaks my reverie. A number of answers quickly cross my mind.

"I'll have a beer," I say.

"99 bananas for me," says the monkey.

"99 bananas? Lay off the bananas, for just once. Have a drink. Have a Sprite. Have a Coke."

"It's a drink," the bartender says.

"He knows what Coke is," I say to her.

"No, 99 bananas is a drink."

"Oh, well, you see, he's always asking for bananas. They're all always asking for bananas."

"I assume that they are monkeys too?"

"Um, yeah, well, except for the ones who are aliens. Oh, and the dog."

The bartender looks about, and, spotting only me and the monkey, begins to get that look that I've become so familiar with. I decide to cut her off.

"They're in the room. Watching HBO. The aliens like the premium channels. They evidently distort over the light-years. I refuse to get the premiums at home, mostly because of the cost, but also because I really believe that movies should be viewed in the proper venue—preferably an old theater with sticky floors, sprung seats and a balcony. I'll even go to those damned cineplexes, I mean, even a reduced screen is a big screen, it's just that . . ."

"Where's the dog?" The bartender puts down a Bud in front of me and an odd looking yellowish drink in front of the monkey.

"Um, she's out with the car."

"You left your dog in the car? Bring her up to your room. I'll save your beer."

"Well, she's not really in the car . . . well, she actually is in the car . . ."

Subject: 99 Monkeys  
Date: Wed, 14 Apr, 1999, 23:34:45-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki

## Absolute Magnitude

"She's driving." The monkey said, dragging a paw across its mouth.

"Yeah, she's driving."

"Your dog drives?" The bartendress says, backing from the bar.

"She's got a license. I taught her myself. She likes to cruise the neighborhoods. It's a dog thing."

"I think I heard about you," the bartendress kept her distance.

"What, the Napa incident? It's the monkeys fault. We just stopped there for some spare interocetor parts. 'Don't forget the bananas,' they said. 'Auto supply stores don't sell produce,' I told them. 'Consider yourself lucky that we even found one that sells interocetors.' 'You have to ask,' one of the other monkeys said. 'They keep them in back,' the other monkey added. 'With the interocetor parts,' the last monkey said.

"How many monkeys are there?" the bartendress asked.

"Well," I replied, sneaking a quick look at the monkey next to me. He was engrossed in licking the final drops of yellow goo from the bottom of his glass. "There were 8 to begin with. 2 went home after TNN ran that Jonny Weismuller 'Tarzan' weekend. I'm sure they were disappointed with what they found. Africa has changed a lot since Tarzan discovered the Lost City of Gold. Um, 1 monkey disappeared under mysterious circumstances; into the damned aliens' ram scoop, according to the other monkeys."

"Thrushth like so many grapes into a juicer," the monkey burped.

"Yeah, well, the damned aliens definitely did one in during their cloning tests. One monkey and most of the goldfish. Oh yeah, and one spontaneously combusted in the backyard last Tuesday afternoon, which is when such things happen according to the aliens who insist their superior culture knows such things, although I'm having doubts after watching some of the stuff they toss into that ram scoop."

"Poop and peels and Pedro Phil my huddle mate," the monkey starts mumbling.

"Another beer?" Courtney asks.

Damn, I know she wants me. I can hear it in the way her voice rises on the word beer and the way she waits impatiently for my answer, even though the bar is empty. At times I wish she would be less direct.

"Yeah, and more bananas for my friend."

"See if they have peanuts," the monkey asks.

"Nuts?"

"Same question I'm asking," Courtney puts the beer and the yellow sludge down. "So, what do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"And a medical experiment in process," the monkey adds, under his breath, his mouth covered as he prepares to sip.

"Just shut up."

"Are you," Courtney glances to the monkey then back to me, "talking to the monkey?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Does he talk back?"

"Too much, considering what he really has to say. Well, except when he has messages from God. Not that they're great messages you understand, still, considering the source and all."

Courtney takes the empty beer bottle and moves to the end of the bar. I wonder if Hemingway had to work under such conditions. The monkeys say they used to talk to Ernest all the time. I'll have to remember to ask them. They insist that "The Old Man In The Sea" was actually taken from an old simian story, "The Aged Monk In the Tree."

Monkeys don't lie. At least that's what they tell me.

Subject: Spider Monkeys

Date: Thur, 15 Apr, 1999, 20:20:21-0400

From: Steve Sawicki

<damnaliens@earthling.net

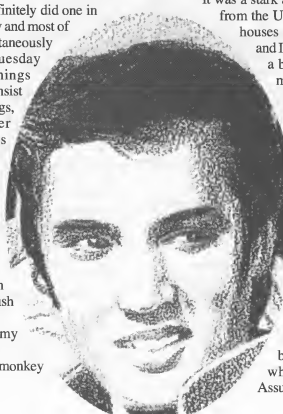
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

It was a stark and dorny night as I made my way from the University Research Center. The frat houses glowed with a cheery illumination and I could feel things brewing. I felt odd, a bit misplaced in time and space; my mutant super powers were obviously about to kick in. The drive home was unevenful.

I had come alone this time. The aliens, damn then, were secreted in the basement doing something with a large package which had arrived by UPS that afternoon. They were excited by it. Evidently UPS is a new concept for them.

The odd feeling grew stronger as I pulled into the driveway. It wasn't exactly deja-vu, but something just like it. I'd felt it before. I think. The house was dark. The damned aliens must still be huddled in the cellar. Who knew what the monkeys might be up to. Assuming there were any left.



## Invisible Friends

I opened the door and entered the house. A dim glow came from the back room office. I could hear the tap of computer keys and the soft swish of a mouse. Or was it a tentacle brushing over fur? I concentrated, bringing my new powers to bear. Nothing. It must be the monkeys. I walked down the short hall to the living room and stood staring at the plants. No aliens. I felt ready, open and receptive. My powers were coming. I knew it. Suddenly, as I stood there trembling, my senses became awash in a ringing sensation. This was it! Peter Parker's Spidey sense tingled. Bruce Banner's metamorphosis to the Hulk came wracked in pain. The psychological torment of Bruce Wayne produced Batman. My powers evidently came with or were precursed by intermittent ringing. It came again and I opened myself fully, waiting, anticipating what form they would take.

"Hey," one of the monkeys called from the other room.

"Don't bother me," I yelled back as the ringing came once more. "My super powers are finally manifesting."

"Oh. Well, do you think you could answer the phone while you're waiting?"

I crossed the room and uncradled the phone. The ringing stopped. I raised the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello!" a cheery voice shot from the ear piece. "Mr. Mxtulpatalich Humhum?"

"Uh, no, sorry."

"Can I speak to Mr. Mxtulpatalich Humhum, then?"

"Hold on. I'll see." I put the phone down and moved to the dining room. The door to the basement was not only shut but latched. I don't know how the damned aliens planned to get out this time. They knew the door only latched on the outside and they knew how pissed I got when they came up through the floor. I lifted the latch and tugged the door open. Lights were flashing in different colors, pulsing to a bass hum which reverberated from below.

"Hey, you guys," I yelled into the depths.

"Hey, what?" one of the damned aliens slid a tentacle mouth along with an eye around a corner.

"Phone," I said, hating when they slid body parts around like that.

"For who? We're kind of busy."

"Hummer," I said.

"Oh," the eye sank into the pseudopod flesh. "He's not here."

"He's not?" I'd seen the mothership in front of the house when I arrived. "You guys fix the scout shuttle?"

"No, the intakes are full of dog hair and the accelerator stick needs replacing."

"Well, I told you not to let the dog use it."

"You had the car and she wanted to go out. Look, we're really busy."

"You doing genetic manipulation again? I told you that..."

"You're creating temperature differentials by holding the door open," the alien interrupted.

"Oh." I started to close the door.

"Thanks," the alien started to withdraw the tentacle.

"Hey," I opened it wide again.

"What now?" The tentacle snapped back around the corner.

"Where's Hummer then?"

"Oh," the tentacle slid back. "He had a date." The damned alien voice faded as the colors intensified and the bass vibration grew.

"What? A date? With who?" The colors swirled but no answer came. I considered going down but recalled the last time I interrupted one of their experiments. Spooze everywhere. I softly closed the door.

"I hung the phone up," a monkey said as he scampered past, his paw full of strawberries. "It was for Hummer."

"I know."

"He's out."

"I know."

"Had a date."

"I know."

"Strawberry?"

"No. Thanks though."

"How's the super powers coming?"

I shrugged.

"Do these come in bigger sizes?" he held out his paw.

"No," I shook my head. "That's about it."

"Oh. Okay. Bye." The monkey moved from couch to chair to lamp to the doorframe of my home office, finally swinging in.

I trailed after.

The three monkeys were in the office, huddled around the computer screen, eating strawberries and occasionally tapping a key or moving the mouse. As I entered they stopped to strike the 'see no, hear no, say no' evil pose.

"Stop that," I said, "or I'll encourage the aliens to scoop one of you."

For a moment they froze, then burst out laughing. They knew an idle threat when they heard one.

"Hey," I suddenly grew excited. "Are you guys writing?" My spirits soared. Finally, the promise of the monkeys would pay off. First reviews: fantasy trilogies, cross-gendered authors, cyber punk pygmalsions, hard scienced old farts... all the books I dreaded but kept getting, then surely they would start doing short stories. I'd, of course, be obliged to take credit.

"No," one of the monkeys said.

"You're not playing Donkey Kong again, are you? I thought I erased that."

"You did," the second monkey said. "We're searching."

"For what?" My suspicions rose.

"We keep hearing mention of it and if it's here we want in."

"In on what?" My mind raced, having heard of the many perversions on the web. My thoughts quailed at what monkeys could be interested in. "What, exactly, are you searching for?"

"Advertising," the third monkey said.



# Absolute Magnitude

"Advertising? What kind of advertising?"

The three monkeys looked at me with serious intent. "Banana advertising. We're thinking we can maybe get them cheaper here than we do at Napa."

"For Pete's sake!" I could contain myself no longer. "You're thinking of Banner Advertising, not Banana Advertising. Why don't you just go to the IGA and buy them?"

The monkeys looked cowed. "We're not allowed in supermarkets."

"Dammit, I'll get them for you. You stay here and write. Start producing or there will be serious consequences. That was the deal, remember? You get loose from the research pens and I let you live here and you write."

The monkeys looked at each other then at me. "We die quicker here than we did at the university."

"Because you mess with the aliens and believe everything they tell you." I pointed out.

"They are a superior culture. Besides, Phil was our best writer," the first monkey said. "And he's gone. Shakespeare had only good things to say about Phil."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Hemingway—you claim to have written for all of them but I see not a single word."

"Poe, Aristophanes, and Ellison too," the monkeys added in chorus.

"Fine, fine, fine, but I'm getting tired of it and want results."

The monkeys fidgeted on the chair, playing with the mouse. "They were nicer to us than you," the second monkey said.

"Nicer? How could they be nicer? You sleep on the couch, you use the fridge and the iron, you get plenty of computer time. What more could you want?"

"Well," the third monkey said, "there's nothing quite like a good dung fling."

"Wait, did you say Ellison?"

"Yeah," the second monkey said, "he was quite the flinger of dung."

"He was no Shakespeare though," the third monkey said.

"No, of course not," the first monkey piped in. "No one could fling dung like Shakespeare."

"Yeah," the second monkey began bouncing in the seat, "Makes you all warm inside just thinking about it."

"You get dung on the computer and I'll be really pissed," I finally broke into their reverie.

"You're no Shakespeare either," the third monkey said.

"Of course not," I replied. "Shakespeare's dead."

The monkeys shifted nervously in their seats. "There's quite a bit of DNA in dung you know."

"Yeah," I replied. "So?"

The monkeys began shifting the mouse back and forth on the pad, keeping their eyes from me.

I didn't need spidey sense to figure out what was going on. "Stop right now, you damn aliens, I'm coming down." I shot from the room.

"He's no Ellison either," the second monkey said.

"Maybe a little?" the first monkey put in.

"Around the eyes? The third suggested.

"Just before the heart attacks," the first suggested.

The other two agreed.

Subject: Monkey Fun, and More  
Date: Fri, 16 Apr, 1999, 08:16:11-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Well, you may remember that the original reason I decided to take the monkeys was because they convinced me they would handle those writing chores that I found tedious—reviewing anthologies, trading insulting mail with Ellison (I swear he has his own monkeys), and knocking off the occasional hack piece for the small press. Needless to say in the time that the monkeys have been here, they've not written a single thing. At least not anything I could use. Sure they bang out the occasional translation for the damned aliens and the all too often RFB (request for bananas) but nothing of substance. It was thus that I found myself at the keyboard finishing up a review column for *Tales of Weird Space and Time*. Sure the editor, Rabbita Den, is a harsh mistress but one finds work where one can.

I sat and pondered, trying to find some way of saying something sucked in a fresh voice. I stared out the door and into the living room when a small motion caught my attention. I fixed my stare at the far floor and the small goldfish that obviously had just walked through the dining room. The aliens, damn them, had been at it again. I rose and stalked to where the poor fish stumbled its way from under the couch. Sure enough there were not only two pair of tiny legs, but from the way the chest heaved the damned aliens had installed lungs as well. I thought for a moment, trying to figure out what to do with this thing. I obviously couldn't put it back into the fish tank. Nor could I let it outside with the killer cat on the loose. I decided to just leave it to its own devices. I mean, how far can a goldfish walk anyway? The damned aliens had much to answer for.

I checked the house and it was empty. The car was not in the driveway, but that only meant the dog had not returned yet. The mothership occupied its space in front of the house and I wondered again how the aliens managed to keep a half mile long spaceship parked for such a long time without getting a ticket. Sure we were in a residential zone, but still. Must be another of their advanced culture tricks. At least it was a more useful one than walking goldfish. I knew the scout shuttle was still down as well. They had replaced the accelerator stick but still had major hair problems with the intakes and had subsequently discovered that the main and the

## Invisible Friends

backup computer had fleas. I'm sure the monkeys would help them with that, assuming the aliens could keep from tossing them into the ram scoop long enough.

And thinking of the monkeys I began to wonder where they were as well. I checked the fridge and it was full of bananas so no problem there. It was as I made my way through the secret passage from my office to the front of the house that I heard the rumbling. Faint at first, but then louder and accompanied by the distinctive wail of monkeys having fun. This could not be a good thing.

I raced to the door and outside. Quickly determining that the commotion came from the nearby park I moved with haste in that direction. Sure enough, there were the aliens, at least, well, four or five of them, pushing a metal trash can down the sidewalk. The screeching of monkeys seemed to come from inside the can.

"Hey," I yelled as I ran toward them. "What are you doing?"

"Who?" one of the aliens shot a pseudopod eye at me, "us?"

"Yes, you," I snapped. "Who else do I know out here?"

"We have not fully investigated your personal relationships," one of the other aliens said, "yet."

"And," another alien pointed, "Isn't that your neighbor? The female you spend so much time watching from the attic? The one..."

"Never mind that. Cees, for guys who spend so much time in the basement you sure know a lot."

"Remember," another alien said, "we're an advanced culture. We know things you have not even imagined."

"Yeah, well, imagine you're going to answer my question," I said.

"We don't really know anything about super powers."

"He want's to know what you're doing here." A monkey's voice drifted from inside the metal trash can.

"This isn't some new ram scoop idea, is it?" I said, placing my foot onto the can.

"No," one of the aliens said. "We're testing reverse hypothesis."

"Oh," I took my foot from the can.

"Yes," another alien said. "We are establishing a baseline."

"Watch," another alien said as all four/five gave the can a hard push.

The can shot from their collective tentacular push and rolled down the sidewalk until it hit a rock and then careened across the grass heading straight for a large dog.

"Shoot," I said, hurriedly running after the can. "Hey! Hey! Pooch! Get up! Move!"

The can slowed somewhat in the grass but still struck the dog with some velocity, bouncing up and over before coming to rest against a large tree. The monkeys screamed in joy, popping out of the opening and stumbling drunkenly all over the area. I watched in amazement. The dog slept.

"Excellent," one of the aliens said as it approached.

"Two more should do," another agreed.

"Perhaps three."

"Perhaps."

"Then we will retire for some spooze before we continue with the difficult assessments."

"What," I finally broke in, "exactly, are you assessing?"

"Fun," one of the aliens said.

"More fun to be exact," another added.

I watched the monkeys staggering about the park, rising, stumbling, falling back down. Then it struck me. "You're testing what could be more fun than a barrel full of monkeys, aren't you?"

The aliens all stared at me.

"Keep it down will you? I'm trying to plan."

"Excuse me?" I looked down at the dog.

"I'm planning the takeover of the world," the dog said, "assuming you remain quiet long enough for me to think straight."

"Looks to me like you were sleeping," I said.

"Looks can be deceiving," one of the aliens noted.

A monkey squealed in delight as it crashed head first to the ground from the low limb of a nearby tree.

"Did you bring the cheeseburgers?" The dog mumbled.

"What cheeseburgers?" I said.

"The ones you promised yesterday."

"I never promised you cheeseburgers," I said. "I don't even know you."

A monkey stumbled back to the barrel and crawled inside. A moment later the barrel rolled off.

"We were in Schenectady," the dog said, "It was late. We were hungry. I gave you a ride. You promised me cheeseburgers."

"A promise is a promise," one of the aliens said.

"Would you like some spooze?" another of the aliens held out a handful of the oozing substance to the dog.

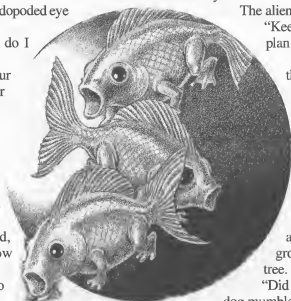
"No thanks," the dog said, "I just had some."

"What?" I could contain myself no longer. "Where did you get Spooze?"

"At the Qwickie Mart," the dog grumbled. "It was on sale."

"What flavors?" one of the aliens said.

"All of them," the dog replied.



# Absolute Magnitude

"This is nuts," I said. "You could not have had spooze and you could not have bought it at the Qwickie mart."

The remaining two monkeys, noticing that the barrel was rolling away, stumbled and staggered after it.

"Indeed I did," the dog said, "and, in fact, I just got some more."

"What?" I said. "That's pure nonsense. You never moved. Your eyes haven't even opened. Show it to me if you have it."

"No," the dog said.

"We believe him," an alien said.

"No, no, no!" I yelled. "I want to see it."

The dog opened first one eye then another before rising to stand. With a quick move the jaws opened and it bit me. As I dropped to the ground it trundled off and out of the park. The monkeys, now all in the barrel again, rolled back towards us.

"Big mistake," one of the aliens said.

"Very big," another agreed.

"But the dog was not being truthful," I groaned, holding my leg. "Until it moved it never left this spot. In fact it dozed the entire time."

"We know," another alien said.

"But it is still a true adage."

"Very true," another agreed.

"What are you talking about?" I said, removing my hand and staring at my bleeding calf.

"Well," one of the aliens said. "We have known for thousands of your Earth years that when one comes upon a sleeping dog..."

All four/five looked at one another then spoke in unison, "one should let it lie."

Subject: Monkeys Over Moscow

Date: Fri, 16 Apr, 1999, 14:41:41-0400

From: Steve Sawicki

<dammaliens@earthling.net

To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

I had to go back to the park to look for that stupid, lying dog. I called the research guys and they really thought it best if I could bring the dog with me when I came in for the final test. I looked everywhere. No dog. My leg hurt. My super powers were either being blocked or were so latent as to be non-existent. I sat on a bench. Things weren't going well. Mike, I know you're struggling with some of this and I appreciate your concern. However, if you really want to meet either the monkeys or aliens you need to call first. They're busy beings, being galactically advanced and all. They're almost always up to something. Usually in the basement. Frankly, I would have thought the fridge full of bananas or the dried dung would have done it for you. Surely the spooze I sent over meant something? You are too much the skeptic in some things.

"You're late." One of the monkeys, I think it was Phil, clambered onto the bench next to me.

"For what?" I said.

"He means you are usually home by this time," one of the damned aliens reformulated on my other bench side.

"I know what late means," I said.

"You look nervous," the monkey said, scratching his hind quarters. "I like the park, lots of parasites."

"Where?" I said, quickly rising.

"Everywhere," the monkey crunched merrily on a flea. "Just walk through the grass."

"Sit," the damned alien waved a tentacle over the bench. "Have some spooze. We're doing new flavors."

"No thanks." I studied the bubbly brown liquid the alien offered. "Hey, what are you guys doing here? What are you up to?" I sat down heavily as reality sank in.

The monkey scratched and looked expectantly at the alien.

"Nothing," the alien said. "Why do you always think we are up to something?"

"Because you always are."

Children played. The wrong dogs romped. The alien internalized his pseudopods.

"Tell me," I said.

The alien, damn him, looked in every direction but mine.

"Tell me or I'll make the monkey talk. You know I can. I read the big book of Dolphin torture you know."

"We know," the monkey said. "Flea?"

"Hey," I said, focusing on the two of them. "Why are you together? Where are the others? Why are you here?"

"Oh good," the monkey said, "I love philosophical discussions."

"We're giving the dog another driving lesson," the alien said.

"You finally debugged the computer and got the hair out of the intakes?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think it won't happen again?"

"Cheesecloth, we brushed the dog and we brought monkey Phil along to sit by the controls and do parasite maintenance," the alien waved his tentacles in rhythmic fashion.

"Which Phil?"

"Philodendrum," said the alien.

"You," I said, turning to the monkey, "let them take another of you into space? What if they scoop him?"

"Phred went with them," the monkey said. "Besides, they're a superior culture so..."

"Yeah," I finished. "So you have no choice."

"Hey," I said. "Phred?"

"He was adopted," the monkey said. "Flea?"

"May I?" she said, stunning us all as she plucked the flea from the monkey's fingers and popped it into her mouth.

"Ummm, nice," she said, letting her tongue slide slowly across her lips. "Beautiful monkey. Yours?"

"Uh, me?" I sputtered. "You're asking me?" God she was beautiful. Tall. Blonde, trim, not a dog hair on her.

"Yes," the monkey said, "To both of you."

## Invisible Friends

"I love a man with a monkey," she said.  
"You do?" I said, "how many do you know?"  
"Monkeys or men?" she said, crossing her arms.  
The monkey looked at me. I sputtered some more. The alien waved tentacles with glee.  
"May I join you?" she said, moving towards the alien.  
"Uh, yeah, sure," I said sliding quickly over to the alien and making space between me and the monkey.  
"I would not have sat on your alien," she said, sinking sinuously onto the bench.  
"It's not mine," I said before I could stop myself.  
"Greetings, Sapien," the alien projected a pseudopod mouth towards her. "I'm Mxxtlptalich Humhum. Want to go out on a date?"

"Pleased to meet you," she said, "call me Svetlana."  
The monkey poked me with a stiff finger.  
"Um, this is Philbert," I said, pointing to the monkey.

"Phil," the monkey said. "Call me Phil."  
"Tell me your secrets," she said, grasping my hand before I could withdraw it.

"My secrets?" I said  
"We have secrets," the damned alien said, "but we can't tell you any of them."

"I am interested only in you," she said, staring directly at me and leaning forward.

"Wow," I said.  
"Unbelievable!" said the damned alien.

"Flea?" said the monkey.  
"Yes," she said, taking it. "Thanks."  
"I really don't have any secrets," I said while she crunched.  
"Don't tell her about the bananas," the monkey said.

"The bananas aren't secret," I said.  
"I know," the monkey said "but she's eating fleas so we can only imagine what she'd do with a fridge full of bananas."  
"Don't tell her any of our stuff," the alien said.  
"I don't know any of your stuff," I said to the alien. "You guys do everything in the basement and you never let me down there."

"We let you in on the DNA experiments," the alien said as Svetlana looked on.

"You called me down because the goldfish had walked under the furnace."

"You participated," the alien insisted.  
"You have computer?" Svetlana purred.  
"Not a very good one," the monkey said.

"What difference does it make to you anyway?" I said to the monkey. "You guys only use it to play games and surf the

web. It's not like you're doing anything productive on it, like writing."

"Phil was our best writer," the monkey said.

"Phil?" said Svetlana.

"Scooped," the monkey and I said in unison looking at the alien.

"I want your hard disk," Svetlana took my face in her hands, pulling it close to hers.

"Um, um, my . . ." I sputtered some more.

"Oh, no," her eyes darted from mine looking past me.

"What?" I said.

"It's the dog," she said, clenching my face tighter.

"Shit," I said, trying to break free. "Where, I need that beast."

"Don't look," she said holding my head stiff. The woman had muscle.

The monkey and the alien both started to turn.

"Don't look," she hissed.

The monkey's head and the alien's eyed pseudopods snapped back.

"If he asks," she said, slinking lower. "I was never here."

"He'll bite me again," I said.

"I'll be . . . in touch," she said.

"Gather your secrets."

"What?" I tried again to break her grip. "I have no secrets."

"We have secrets," the alien said, "but we can't tell you."

"Watch out for me," she dipped lower on the bench, pulling me with her.

"We'll be happy to tell you," the monkey said. "As soon as we get some."

"Beware the dog," Svetlana pulled my face to hers and gave me a hard, long kiss, then let go. "Here it comes."

I spun around along with the monkey and the damned alien. A small Pomeranian sat on the other side of the bench, framed by the WWII obelisk which towered behind it, tall and dark and oblong. Bach played on someone's boom box in the distant background. The dog stared up at us.

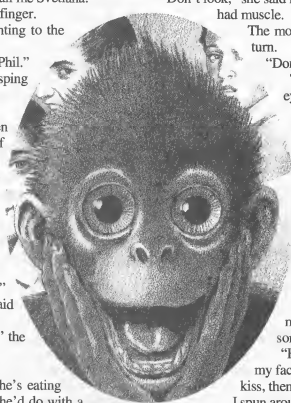
"I'm not moving," I said.

"He's not either," the damned alien said.

"My God," the monkey said, "it's full of fleas."

Subject: Then There Were Two  
Date: Fri, 16 Apr, 1999, 19:20:21 -0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanale@Boggie.com

Michael,



# Absolute Magnitude

I went straight to the hospital from the park. No dog. They gave me a shot. Damn, but things have boiled over. They are now, I believe, beyond even my control. I can't take no more responsibility for events past this point I think. The tests are over. Finished for now. Done. The check comes in two days. I need the money. I need still more. I am full of radiation. The researchers at the university hospital suggested that I wait a while before returning. They are jealous of my super powers. They said a year might be good. Hard to make money that way though. They are mighty strange. Thus I returned home.

I knew, almost immediately, that something was wrong. The aliens, damn them, sat in the living room, playing poker.

"You're back," one of the aliens shot a pseudopodded mouth towards me. At least I think it was towards me since there were mouths, eyes and tentacles flying in more directions than physics should allow. The aliens, you see, cheat.

"You are obviously the product of an advanced culture," I said.

"Sarcasm is not appreciated," the alien said. "I raise," he threw chips to the table. "Spooze?" to me again.

"You know I don't like it," I said.

"You like so little lately," another of the aliens said. "I call."

"Why are the walls so gooey?" I changed the topic.

"There was an implosion," a different alien said. "I call too."

I stayed silent, studying the walls and waiting.

The aliens played cards.

"Where's the dog?" I said.

"She went to the drive-in with the Beagle down the street and Hummer. They're double dating."

"The Beagle?" I said, noting the clock had stopped.

"It's platonic, don't worry," the first alien said. "Two pair."

"We know," the other two aliens chimed in unison. "You win!"

"If you all know each other's hands, why do you play?" I asked.

"If you all know you are going to die," an alien responded, "why do you live?"

"Let's get back to this implosion," I said, sighing.

"Okay," one of the aliens said, cutting the cards. "Old blind Lucy," it said, starting to deal. "What do you want to know?"

"Old blind Lucy?" I could not help myself.

"Buy a card after a 6 or 3," the second alien said.

"Card following a 9 is wild until the next 9 and if 9 is last nothing wild," the third alien continued.

"Pay double on a 4, all bets and calls," the first one finished.

"You guys are really weird," I said.

"Well, all forms of advanced culture will appear to be incomprehensible to the savages," the second alien said. "We have spoken of this in the past."

"The implosion?" I said.

"Phillipe," the third alien said, looking at his cards as well as the second's.

"Phillipe imploded?"

The aliens waved tentacles in affirmation, sneaking glances at each other's hands as the cards fell.

"How did that happen?" I said.

"Well," one of the aliens said, "something goes horribly wrong internally, creating a vacuum, and everything else gets sucked in to fill the void." The alien dealt cards. "You got a 6, you want another?"

"I don't understand," I said. "Monkeys don't just implode."

"We know," the first alien said, tossing a chip and buying a card. "And obviously they do," he gestured about the room.

"You had the same incomprehension about the spontaneous combustion, remember?" the third alien pointed out.

I nodded. "When did this happen?"

Two of the aliens directed tentacles to the stopped clock while the third finished dealing and took advantage to sneak additional peaks at their hands. 5:38 PM.

"Svetlana stopped by," the dealing alien then said.

"Again?" I grew nervous and whispered, "she's not still here, is she?"

"No," one of the aliens said, tossing chips onto the table.

"She left you a message though."

I watched them play cards and waited.

"Well," I finally said.

"Well, what?" the second alien said, studying the hands of the other two.

"You said Svetlana left me a message?"

"Yes, we did say that," the first alien said.

"And she did, in fact, do that," the third one added.

"And?" I prodded. "What was it?"

"We don't know," the first alien shifted cards in his tentacles, "she left it with Phillippe. I call."

"Hey," I said, "Where're the other monkeys? They didn't implode in other parts of the house, did they?"

"No," the first alien said, waving a pseudopod in dismissal.

"You think strangely," the second one said, dealing another round. "Always jumping to these odd conclusions."

"The monkeys are fine," the third said. "They're in Wisconsin."

"The monkeys went to Wisconsin?"

"Your comprehension wavers," one of the aliens said. "Eights are wild now?"

"Yes," I said. "And speaking of missing, where are the rest of you? The basement was dark when I got here and the mothership is missing."

"How do you think the monkeys got to Wisconsin?" The third alien said tossing a handful of chips to the table. "I'm winning."

"We know," the other two aliens said in unison.

"Why did the monkeys go to Wisconsin?"

"Because the season had closed in Idaho," the first alien said, studying his cards.

## Invisible Friends

"At least that is what we understand," the second alien chipped in.

"And we understand a lot," the third alien said.

"So you keep telling me," I watched them play for a moment. "All right, I give up. What season?"

"The cheese season."

"Cheese doesn't have a season," I said.

"Of course it does," the third alien said. "You get in big trouble if you get caught hunting it out of season," he continued.

"Big trouble," agreed the third alien. "Fives are wild now. I raise."

"You're telling me that the rest of you, plus the two monkeys, are in Wisconsin hunting cheese?" I said.

"Well, Hummer's not there," the second alien said. "I call."

"No, Hummer's not," the first alien said. "Me too."

"Cheese does not need to be hunted." I moved closer to the table, sidestepping the monkey bits on the floor.

"That is a popular misconception," the first alien said.

"Cheese can be a very wily opponent," said the second alien.

"Especially when they know you are coming. They lie there immobile, feigning death, waiting," the third alien added.

"You think cheese feigns death?"

"Explains much, does it not?" the first alien moved its cards around.

"Yeah," I agreed, eyeing them one after the other before stepping back. "It certainly does."

"You don't look so good," one of the aliens said, spreading his cards on the table. "I win again."

"We know," the other two said in unison, waving tentacles and pseudopods all about.

"When will everyone be back?" I said, watching the display.

"Tomorrow we think," the first alien said.

"Unless they get their limit sooner," the second one said.

"There is a limit to how much cheese you can hunt?" I said. The aliens looked at one another then to me.

"Yes," said the third. "And it's a Gouda thing too."

They all laughed. I winced. "Who's going to clean up the monkey?"

The aliens stopped their laughter and looked around the room, shooting pseudopods in all directions.

"We will," the first alien said. "We can de-molecularize it."

"Will that hurt the paint?"

They all looked around the room again. "We don't think so," the second said. "We'll keep it on a low setting."

"What would happen if you are wrong?"

The aliens looked at each other.

"Well," the first one said. "The structure could be reduced to component parts."

"Do you mean the walls?"

"No, we mean the house," the third one said as the other two counted chips.

"Never mind then. I'll clean the monkey in the morning."

"Excellent," the first alien said.

"I'm going to bed now. If Svetlana comes back don't answer the door."

"Okay," the third alien said, shuffling the cards with a flourish. "Old blind, dumb, stupid Lucy."

"Excellent choice," the first alien said. "Oh, and don't worry. We'll take care of the remaining arrangements."

"You do that," I said, turning to climb the stairs, exhausted.

It was not until I awoke in a cold sweat that I thought to wonder just what they meant.

Subject: Phillipe is no more  
Date: Fri, 16 Apr 1999 19:31:18-0400  
From: Steven Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net>  
To: Combined lists <BCC all-132 count>

Begin conversion. It is with regret and sadness that we are gathered here at this moment to announce the passing of monkey Phillipe. Phillipe went quickly, evidently imploding, possibly due to a conflict of earthly physics and alien technology. There were no witnesses. Phillipe's passing occurred (based on organic matter stopping a clock) at 5:38 PM this day. There will be no actual service as physical remains are sparse. A memorial thought will occur on Sat at Noon. Listen for the whistles. Phillipe, always ready to share a tasty snack or lend a paw for a good scratch and search will be missed. Contributions may be made to CATO (Chimps Across The Ocean) the organization dedicated to returning our simian friends, along with a few trusted keepers, to their natural habitats of Bermuda, Aruba and St. Thomas. No alien concepts or technology were used in the structuring or transmission of this message. End conversion.

Subject: Misunderstanding  
Date: Sat, 17 Apr, 1999, 06:06:01-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<dammaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

I can't explain the weird emails you keep saying you are getting. Send one or two back to me. I think someone is pulling your leg. In any case, listen, I was sitting down at the computer this morning, getting ready to write, when I noticed the damn aliens starting to file past, one after the other. There must have been, well, it's hard to tell how many when they walk really close together because of all the intertwined tentacles. I knew immediately that something was up and quickly move to follow. I found them in the basement, huddled over a puddle.

# Absolute Magnitude

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Genetic manipulation of basic DNA strands," one replied in a sort of offhanded way.

"In my basement?" I said, aghast.

"Should we go outside?"

"Um, no, probably not. The neighbors are starting to talk."

"Look," one of them said, stirring the muddy soup. "This is the stuff of life."

"Actually, that chunk there looks sort of like cat poo."

The aliens all looked at one another and waved tentacles.

"That would explain a lot, we think."

"Hey, you can't insult an entire species because you forgot to take poo out of your scientific ritual," I replied, looking for a sharp stick to poke them with or perhaps a stone to throw.

The aliens spooned their bulks to the left, raising their tentacles in unison. "It explains quite nicely your genetic response, as a race of course, to things which are free."

"What? You aliens continue to draw conclusions based on the thinnest of theories, and now, poo?"

The aliens shared a look then one reached into a pouch and withdrew a bound bundle. "Look what we have for you."

My eyes were caught by the stark whiteness and the simple elegance of straight black. Suddenly I knew where all my mail had been going, or at least the important parts of it. "Oooooooh, magazines," I said, reaching blindly out.

"You will go upstairs and not bother us again today," one of the damned aliens said while waving the magazines in a rhythmic fashion.

"Yes," I said, as I finally got my hands on them. "Oh," I said, turning at the bottom of the stairs. "Are you guys sending out emails under my name?"

The aliens studied the muddy puddle before them.

"I knew it," I turned. "Stop it, you are creating confusion."

Subject: Greetings and Saltinations  
Date: Sat, 17 Apr, 1999, 08:22:44-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: Combined Lists (bcc:all-134 count)

## Greetings Sapiens

(Note the formal and proper usage of the greeting particularly considering your races' penchant for queasiness at queeriness)

It has come to our attention that Mr. Sawicki (or Slippery as Hummer calls him) has been sending out notices concerning talking monkeys and, gasp, aliens. Where does he come up with these things? We would like to, at this time remind you that Mr. Sawicki is not only a writer but on medication. You must take anything he says or writes with

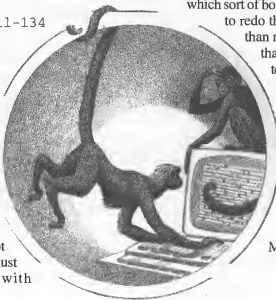
considerable numbers of sodium crystals or, as one of your beloved leaders once said, "strange days indeed." If Mr. Sawicki's writings were by some chance true, then the merchandising for such things as Spocze, action figures with full tentacular action, model motherships, a 'monkey dung' video game, t-shirts, etc. would already be snapped up. We would also like to point out that under the interstellar creator code of Admok21113, the full rights to any such creations would belong not to Mr. Sawicki but to the aforementioned non-existent aliens.

We hope that you will take Mr. Sawicki's wanderings of the mind in the same light as which they were written—a dim, barely visible one. We express our mutual gratitude in advance. Feel free to send DNA. The dog says hello. Bye for now and please just delete any further notes, letters, manila packages or emails you may get from Mr. Sawicki without actually reading them. Feel no guilt. His mind is sideways.

Subject: Everybody's Got Something To Hide, Except For Me and . . .  
Date: Sat, 17 Apr, 1999, 10:10:11-0400  
From: Steve Sawicki  
<damnaliens@earthling.net>  
To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

I don't know why you still think all that strange email is from me, except that you insist it has my name on it. Why would I send a death notice for a monkey? The flowers were nice anyway. The dog loved them. I have bigger problems though. Dammit Mike, she's everywhere; knocking at the doors, looking in the windows, constantly calling, emailing, and faxing. I don't know what to do. I've considered calling the president twice but thought better of it. I'm not sure he'd be much help anyway. Maybe the CIA or those guys at club 54 or 51 or whatever that area is would be a better choice. I'm at wits end. Took all morning to clean the damn monkey off the walls too. Monkey hardens to this really stiff substance

which sort of bonds with paint so I'm going to have to redo that whole room now. Took longer than normal because I just don't feel all that good. Haven't ever since the last test. My super powers should have counteracted any negative effect of the radiat on so I can't quite figure out what's going on. Might be I'm being targeted with some substance which is neutralizing my powers, sort of like Kryptonite and Superman. Except my home world has not exploded. At least I don't think it has. Have you heard anything? Maybe I better ask the experts.



## Invisible Friends

"Hey, Hummer," I called out from my office. "Do you guys know if my homeworld is still intact?"

A pseudopoded mouth snapped around the edge of the door frame. "Yes."

"Okay, good." I turned back to the keyboard. "Hey! Was that yes for 'yes' you know or 'yes' it is still intact?"

The pseudopod snaked back into my office. "Yes."

A trio of pseudopoded eyes slowly crept into view.

"You're trying to be funny, aren't you?" I said.

"The monkeys are teaching us the subtleties of humor," Hummer said.

"The monkeys aren't particularly funny, you know," I said, watching the pseudopods intertwine.

"They are better than television," Hummer said, withdrawing his eyes. "Or a long kiss with noodles which have been humidified."

"How did your race become so advanced without the concept of humor?" I said, watching tentacles dance.

"None of the really advanced races have it you know," Hummer said. "We believe it is a hindrance, particularly when you have nuclear capability."

"Global destruction as an April Fool's prank?"

The pseudopods moved in many affirming directions.

"This has been tested?" I said.

"Well, it's not like we get invitations or anything but it does make a great deal of sense."

I shook my head. "Who's teaching you?"

"Phil, of course," Hummer said. "Phred got scared when Svetlana came over."

"She scares Phred too?"

"He has a crush on her."

"And that scares him?"

"It's a monkey thing, we think," Hummer withdrew the mouth pseudopod. "Oh, she's coming back you know," the alien said, sliding the pseudopod back into view.

"Great Caesar's Ghost," I sat bolt upright, "When?"

Hummer shot a pseudopod toward the window to look outside. "About an hour, provided the planetary rotation does not change."

"Are you messing with the orbit again?" I said. "The weather is still out of control since the last time."

"Not us," Hummer said.

"Fooling around with the sun?"

"Haven't been near it."

"Black holes?"

"What about them?" a second pseudopoded mouth shot into the room, followed by an eye. "Do you have one?"

"Are you or are you not doing something to make the planet spin differently?" I said, feeling my anger build.

"We merely made an observation, not an admission," a different alien voice said.

"If you guys are going to just shoot pseudopods into the room willy-nilly I wish you would at least have the decency to make them different colors so I could recognize you."

"You don't know who we are?"

"Never mind."

"Let's go fishing!" Hummer said.

"Fishing?" I said.

"Your comprehension is wavering again," the second alien said.

"Why do you want to go fishing?" I leaned back in my office chair.

"Because you promised," Hummer said.

"Because Svetlana is coming and you don't like being here when she does," the second alien said.

"Good enough for me," I jumped up from the chair.

"We'll take the scout ship," Hummer said.

"No, we'll take the car," I said. "The dog wants to go somewhere."

"We taught the dog how to pilot the scoutship," the second alien said.

"Yeah, and she left all those silly take off and landing marks in those farmer's fields you used to practice in," I said.

"Okay," Hummer said, "I'll get the spooze."

"Get some cheese too," I said, recalling the bounty of the previous evening's hunt.

"Um," Hummer waved his tentacles in anxiety. "It's gone."

"One hundred and sixty two pounds of cheese is gone?"

"Phred eats when he gets scared," Monkey Phil said, entering the room.

"How does a twenty pound monkey eat eight times his weight in processed dairy product?"

The room became silent as tentacles waved and Phil's tail curled and uncurled.

"One bite at a time," Hummer finally said.

The other aliens spun their tentacles in glee and Phil doubled over.

"The monkeys taught you that?" I said to Hummer who could only feebly wave a pseudopod in weak affirmation.

"You monkeys just aren't that funny," I said, turning to Phil.

Phil grew serious. "We live in the jungle and eat bugs, what do you expect?"

"You don't write enough either," my voice rose.

"You are angry," Hummer said.

"We will exact punishment," another of the damned aliens spoke up.

"Yes," a third chimed in. "Let us all . . ."

"... spank the monkey," they said in unison.

Tentacles waved once more at a frantic rate.

"Let's go," I said, "Maybe fresh air will help."

"Have I told you about the new South Park community being built in Northern Great Britain?" Hummer said, trailing after me. "Every week they Kilkeny."

"The bastards," a second alien added.

"And I thought it was bad when you were on that Green Acres kick a while back," I said, ushering the group out the door and to the car. "Six or seven of you talking like Zsa Zsa Gabor. You should all be embarrassed. Advanced culture



## Absolute Magnitude

indeed." The dog jumped into the driver's seat and started fumbling for her keys.

"No, I'll drive," I said, pushing her into the back between a pair of aliens. "You get the car when we get out." A third alien flowed into the hatchback and the monkeys clung to a fourth in the passenger seat. I'm never quite sure where the other three go but they're always there when we arrive.

The trip to the river was uneventful, with the single exception that one of the damned aliens might have lost a tentacle after waving it too far out the window. It's hard to tell sometimes, they have so many going in so many different directions.

"This is your fishing stain?" one of the aliens said, gazing out at the cornfields which paced either side of the country road.

"Spot," I said, "and we have to walk a bit to get there."

"Now," I said, turning to the dog, but it was too late, the car already sped away from us. The dog was quick. Especially considering she doesn't shift all that well with paws.

"Damn," I said. "I wanted her to get milk while she was out."

"Damn," Hummer said, "she drove off with the spooze."

"Damn," Phil said, "she has the bananas."

"Damn?" a different alien said, pointing upstream.

"Very funny," I picked up the gear and turned. "Walk this way."

I caught my mistake immediately and I'm incredibly proud that I did not turn once to see what transpired behind me. From the sounds it would not have been a pretty sight.

The sun dappled the water as it wafted through leaves of overhanging trees. A large fish, trout probably, rose in the near distance, dimpling the water. Flies emerged from the surface and buzzed off. Feeding time. I put on my waders and connected my fly rod. The aliens watched and the monkeys swung from low branches.

"The object is to remove the aquatic things from the liquid?" Hummer said.

"Yes, using skill and wily cunning by presenting an artificial device called a fly, which . . ." a rather large zap spoiled my lesson. I turned.

One of the aliens stood at the bank of the river, holding what looked like a molecular repeller. Smoke drifted from the barrel.

"What did you do?" I cried, wanting to stomp over but tangling my legs in the waders which proved resistant to a good stomp.

"Caught some," the alien said, pointing.

"You're not supposed to use advanced technology to fish," I said, shaking my rod at the alien.

"Why not?" Hummer said.

"Because fishing," I said as the two monkeys dropped from the tree limbs, "is man's attempt to regain his place in nature by going mano a mano with the elements in the quest for food."

"Using a carbon fiber rod, industrial rubber waders and machine made flies tied to synthetic plastic fishing line is returning to one's ancestral hunting roots?" Phil waggled his tail.

"How do you know so much about fishing?" I cut off the monkey's undoubtedly smart-assed reply.

"We have been observing man for centuries. We also possess incredibly long term racial memories as well as cultural memories," Phil, said.

"Wow," I sat back onto the bank of the river. "That's fantastic. The knowledge you must have within you."

"Yes," Phred said. "Ooooooooo, look!"

"What?" I turned quickly to stare where he pointed.

"Ants."

Phil grabbed a couple of sticks and the two monkeys got busy licking and crunching.

"So much for cultural memory," I tugged the waders from my legs. "And so much for fishing as well." Fish of all kind floated in the pool before us.

Hummer stared at the monkeys as the other aliens began to gather their catch.

"They spend much time living the moment," he said.

"Yeah," I shook dirt from the waders. "Very Zen-like."

Hummer's tentacles flailed in excitement. "You know of Zen?"

"Well," I cautiously admitted, "I have read a bit."

"About him?" Hummer said.

"Him?" I shot back. "Him who?"

"Zen!" Hummer wiggled a pseudopod mouth before me.

"Huh?"

"Zen Jenkowski," one of the monkeys said, sliding the stick from its lips with a loud pop.

"What's this?" one of the other aliens shot a tentacle at me.

"Sucker," I said, studying the fish. It didn't look right. "Throw it back."

"And this?" another fish shot towards me.

"Trout," I said. This one didn't look quite right either. "Keep that one."

"And this?" the tentacles were flying.

"Um, a turtle," I said looking at it. "But why is . . . Hey, let me see that trout again."

A tentacle snaked over to me and dropped the fish in my lap.

"This fish is dead," I said, holding it. "Boiled."

"Give a man a fish and he learns slime, teach a man to fish and he learns frustration, but boil a man a fish and he eats right away," one of the damned aliens chimed in.

"Frankly," I said, "you guys worry me."

"The repeller must have been set a bit too high," Hummer said.

"Forget the repeller," I shook my head, putting on my sneakers. "Tell me about Jenkowski."

## Invisible Friends

"Well," Hummer shifted his bulk over the surface of the river bank. "He was a nice enough guy. Farmer. 12th century."

"Big drinker," one of the monkeys said.

"Is this more monkey humor?" I shot a sideways glance at the simians but they were busy digging and crunching ants. "Zen is a religion, sort of."

"No," Hummer shrunk in on himself, the alien version of guilt and shame. "Zen is a drinking game."

"Excuse me?" I said, sitting more upright.

"We shall wait to continue," Hummer said.

"No, no, no," I shook my head. "I meant I do not believe it."

"Honestly," Hummer said, pulling in his tentacles, "we will not say anything until you get back."

"I meant about this Zen thing."

"What is there hard to believe about it?" Hummer said, oozing a tentacle towards a particularly flaky piece of boiled fish.

"Hey, look!" one of the monkeys dove from the ant hill straight into the water.

"Well," I said, turning to the remaining monkey, Phred I think, "that pretty much kills your parasite picking."

"No," Phred said. "This is not an uncommon occurrence. In fact, whenever we are near water we designate a parasite holder. Would you like me to hold your parasites?"

"I don't have any parasites," I said, reminding the monkey of that fact for the hundredth time.

"The selfish ones always say that, you know," Phred said.

"Tell me about Zen," I said, once more turning to Hummer as the monkey splashed in the water with the boiled fish.

"Well, Zen is really just a drinking game that Zen Jenkowski thought up one night," Hummer's pseudopoded eyes glazed in memory.

"Striving to achieve nothingness?" I tentatively asked.

"Exactly," Hummer said. "First one there wins."

"Wins what?" I said.

"One is never quite sure since the act of winning pretty much precludes the remembering of winning," Hummer sucked down a boiled trout whole. "Even those who come in second and third remember little."

"I see," I said.

"Shakespeare was good at it," Phred said.

"Shakespeare apparently was good at everything," I pointed out.

"Not such a great writer," Phred shook his head.

"Couldn't do dialogue," Phil yelled from the water.

"Great at Zen though," Hummer put in.

"You guys are pulling my leg," I said, rising.

Hummer used a pair of pseudopods to check his tentacles and those of the other aliens. "Not us, I think," he said.

"Figure of speech," I rose, collecting my gear. "Gather up your fish and let's go, the dog should be back by now."

"You are a confusing people," One of the other aliens said.

"It's intentional," I said, "Keeps the aliens on their toes."

Hummer once more sprung pseudopods in all directions.

"Never mind," I said. "Hey, there aren't any more of these Zen things around are there?"

"You mean human myths and archetypes that are really foolish fancies that caught on?" Hummer asked.

"When you put it that way it sounds stupid."

"There are quite a few," Monkey Phil said.

"Tell him about the 8th century German clock-making beer taster," Monkey Phred added.

Hummer sucked in his tentacles.

"Go ahead," I said with a sigh, noting the dog had not yet returned with the car. "Tell me while we wait."

"Well," Hummer began, "perhaps you're familiar with the smiling fat man?"

"Buddha?" my voice wavered a bit.

Hummer shook his pseudopods in affirmation.

"Buddha Busenwunder," Monkey Phil said, "There's a reason he's smiling."

I looked up and down the road, shaking my head and talking to myself. "That dog can't get back here fast enough."

Subject: Monkey Phone Home

Date: Sat, 17 Apr, 1999, 15:30:45-0400

From: Steve Sawicki

<damnaliens@earthling.net

To: MMGonchanal@Boggie.com

Mike,

I know it has not been that long since you heard from me last. Will this vacation never end? Seems like one lost weekend after another. I found another ad for medical testing and it seemed pretty good paying but they want to open the top of your head. At least there's no radiation involved. I just don't know if I need the cash that badly. There has to be some better way to make a few extra bucks. All right, so I need more than a few extra bucks. Too bad I'm running out of monkeys. I'm sure there's some way to cash in on them. God knows they haven't been writing at all, just dying in interesting ways. Has to be the aliens. Even the dog has been avoiding them. For an advanced culture they act pretty primitive some times. Oh, and speaking of primitives you would not believe what happened.

"There's a message for you on the answering machine," Monkey Phil said as he swung through the hallway and into the living room.

"I don't care," I threw my hat onto a nearby chair, trying not to look at the yet to be painted walls and ceiling.

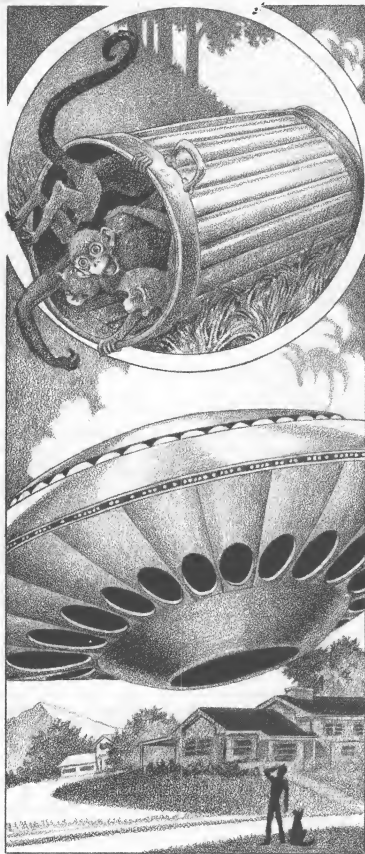
"I think it's from God," Phil stopped on top of the couch.

"You think?" I said.

"You should listen," Phil said, scratching his leg. "We're simians, everyone sounds like God to us."

"Great, just what I need," I crossed my arms over my chest and peered into the office where the answering machine's cycloptic red glare blinked on and off, "more cryptic messages from the Almighty."

## Absolute Magnitude



"Maybe He wants to make you a saint," Phil said.

"Only the Pope can do that, and it takes like a dozen cardinals, twenty-five years and black smoke or something," I uncrossed my arms.

"I'm sure God could do it if He really wanted to," Phil popped a couple of parasites into his mouth and crunched.

"I'm sure God's too busy leaving barely intelligible e-mail or something. He seems to have a thing for not getting straight to the point," I sighed, getting ready to move.

"He's God," Phil said, a handful of fleas halfway to his lips.

"So you've said."

"He has to be, by definition, barely comprehensible," Phil's hand clenched and I could hear a flea pop. "You are often that way as well."

"Thanks, I think."

"You are welcome and you do," Phil popped the fleas into his mouth and chewed.

"All right, let's listen," I walked across the living room to my office and pressed the playback button. The machine whirled for what seemed like a long time then stopped. It clicked a few times then started to play.

"Hello?" A youngish, scratchy voice came from the small speaker. "Hello? Ah, I see. All right, here goes." Throat clearing followed. "Hello there, this is Jesus. You're not home right now so I'm leaving you this message. It's a very important message. I can only leave it once so I hope you get it in time. It's critical for you. Especially with the Rapture and the Millennium approaching, although we're not going to be able to pull it off like we had hoped, all neat and tidy in an even year package with lots of zeros—anti number of the beast you know. We're having difficulty just figuring out who's supposed to go where. Seems like the database we use and the one that Satan's been filling are incompatible. Figures. We get the priests and the geeks and he gets the lawyers and programmers. It's a real mess. We may have to wait for Gates to get here. Or there, depending on what he does. I hope he's not a Buddhist, they're so darn anti-technological. Frankly, we may never pull it off. Who would have thought you would breed so quickly? And die so fast. And do both so often? You're not supposed to do that. Design flaw I think. In any case, and this is the important part, you really, really need to . . ."

The machine clicked off at the end of the one minute message. I waited but nothing.

"That's it?" I said.

Phil shrugged.

"I don't believe it."

Phil softly scratched.

"He could have left a longer message," I stared at the machine.

## Invisible Friends

"He probably had other calls to make," Phil said.

"He could have called back."

"Gods rarely do that," Phil said.

"He could have left simultaneous messages," my voice grew louder, "He could have reversed time. He could have just wished it to be different," I smacked my fist into my hand. "He's God! He's supposed to be able to do things like that."

"I'm sure there are very good reasons why it had to turn out this way," Phil said.

"And you," I said, turning, "You can stop being God's apologist."

"I'm sure your anger is just a momentary indiscretion due to circumstances and radiation," Phil said.

"And you can stop apologizing for me too," I screamed.

"I'm confident it will all pass," Phil said, moving to the other side of the room.

"Pass? Pass? How do you know? How do you know this is not my super power?" I stamped my feet.

"Strong emotions as a super power?" Phil said.

"Yes!" I said.

"I'm not sure I see the utility in that."

"Why does there have to be utility," I screamed. "Maybe for every Superman there's a Stupidman. For every Wonder Woman there's a Wondering Woman. For every Amazing Hulk, an Amazing Sulk."

"And that would make you . . . ?"

"Angry! I'm Angry Man!"

"It's an interesting concept," Phil said, edging toward the secret passage.

I watched him move until my eye caught on my computer.

"Hey," I said. "What happened here?"

"The cover?" Phil kept moving.

"Yes, the cover," my voice, which had dropped to normal started to rise again. "Why is the cover off?"

"It wasn't me," Phil said, "Phred did it."

"Did what?"

"Removed the hard disk," Phil's paw reached for the door to the secret passage. Like any good secret passage, though, it was locked.

"Why would he do that?" I watched Phil's eyes dart about the room. "Wait," I realized. "He was writing while I was gone, wasn't he? Now he's taking what he wrote to a publisher."

"No," Phil said.

"An agent?"

"No," Phil said.

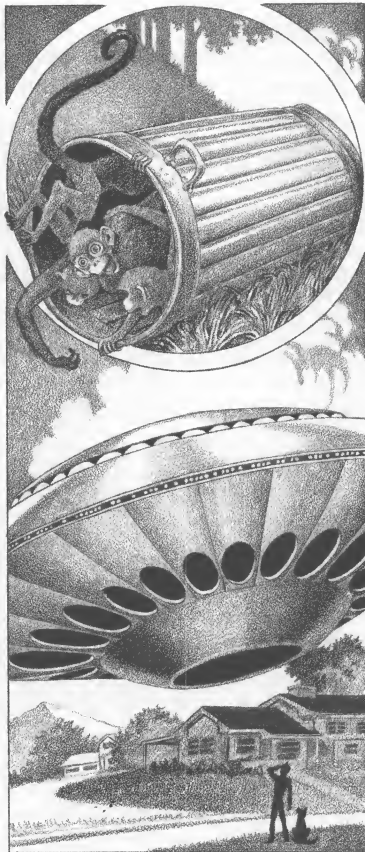
"Boy, you really have to respect a monkey that would put effort into going directly from editor to editor. Who's he starting with? Dozois? Schmidt? That Harsh Warren guy?"

"No," Phil shrunk into himself.

"Then where did he go with it?" I scratched myself.

"Moscow."

"Well, I can understand wanting to lock in foreign rights but shouldn't we publish in English first?" I scratched some



# Absolute Magnitude

more.

"Flea?" Phil held out his paw.

"No thanks," I scratched and thought.

"Can I get some grapes?"

"Sure," I said, trying to figure out Phred's marketing strategy as Phil crept past.

"Hey," I finally said as Phil swung through the living room.

"Why didn't he just print out a copy and bring that?"

Phil stopped at the entrance to the dining room. "There was nothing to print out," he said, hanging from the doorframe.

"Then what's on the harddrive?"

"Just your stuff," Phil said.

"I'm confused then," I scratched some more. "Why did Phred take the drive?"

Phil swung slower. "Svetlana asked him to."

"What?" I yelled. "She's here?"

"No," Phil said.

"Where?" A sinking feeling settled over me.

"Moscow."

"With Phred?"

"Yes," Phil said. "Can I have grapes now?"

"Oh, man, and he just went along with what she asked?"

"He had to, you know," Phil slowly swung to a halt.

"Yeah, yeah, superior species and all that," I looked at the open computer. "But can't you guys rank superiority or something?"

"We're monkeys," Phil dropped to the floor. "We watch, we listen, we do."

"You never did much writing," I said.

"Phil was our best writer," Phil said.

"Yeah, yeah, so you always say," I moved to sink into a chair.

"Besides," Phil scratched, picked off a couple of fleas then munched, "You never told us to."

"What?" I leapt from the chair. "Why, of course I... I know that on at least three or four... I'm pretty sure that once... Damn you're right."

"Sorry," Phil sat there.

"You could have said something," I shook my head.

"We don't do that much anymore," Phil ran his paw over the floor. "Especially since you started shooting us into space."

"Monkeys haven't been in space since the sixties," I said.

"We were there just last week with the aliens," Phil studied a piece of what must have been either dung or Phillipe.

"You can't think of us both as being the same."

"We have no choice," Phil slapped the hardened object back and forth between his paws. "You are superior species."

"Speaking of superior species," I said. "Where are the damn aliens?"

"Basement," Phil started tossing the object into the air and catching it.

"What is that?"

Phil caught the object and studied it. "Liver," he said. "Phillipe's. Want some?"

"No, thanks, you can take it outside with you though," I ran my fingers through my hair, which came out in a clump.

Phil studied me. "Radiation," he said. "Happened to us during those Mercury flights. That's why they put us in space suits."

I stared at my hair as a thought struck me. "Why didn't the aliens stop Svetlana?"

"They never came out of the basement," Phil said. "Can I get my grapes now?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Do you know what they are doing down there?"

Phil sighed and turned one last time before slipping into the kitchen. He shrugged. "They had fish."

"Boiled?"

Phil shook his head. "No."

Just then a deep bass rumble spread up from the basement. There could be no mistaking the note of an alien DNA sequencer nearing the end of its run.

"Did they bring anything else down?" I said just as Phil tried to turn.

"Olives, two bottles of Ketchup, a yellow bell pepper, some sandpaper, vodka, a hammer..." Phil scratched his head, found a flea and crunched. "Mustard, some string, a sneaker and, oh yeah, a picture of Elvis."

"Oh no," I cried, "They're trying again. They'll never get Elvis to last more than a few weeks. He's inherently unstable. I've got to stop them." I moved quickly to the cellar stairs.

"Grapes, now?" Phil said.

"Go, get grapes," I said, struggling with the humidity warped cellar door.

Phil turned and trotted into the kitchen just as I heard the car pull into the drive. The dog was home but she'd be no help now. I yanked hard on the door as a final deep knell sounded. There, below me, were goldfish, slowly climbing the stairs as if they were making their way from some dark swamp into the light. Their little legs struggled with each riser and they had to rest before moving on. Faint sounds came from the back of the basement. I could barely make out the words.

"Spooze dood?" I thought I heard Hummer say.

"Why, thank you," a deep voice replied. "Thank you very much."

Subject: Monkeys At The Gate

Date: Wed, 14 Apr, 1999, 14:14:41-0400

From: Steve Sawicki

<dammaliens@earthling.net

To: MMGonchana1@Boggie.com

Mike,

I've been feeling lousy. Got up three times last night. Dizzy, headache, muscle cramps, eyes don't focus well. Maybe something I ate. Kept hearing all kinds of noises. First, odd clanks and clangs from the basement. Then there were noises outside. Then it sounded like they came from the first floor. Every couple of hours, lots of noise. The damn aliens must have been up to something. Had to be the aliens, all the monkeys but one are gone

## Invisible Friends

and the dog's always out. Then it got real quiet. Too quiet. I had to leave. Went for a walk. Tried to clear my head. Dizzy. Don't even really know where I went, just that it took a long time to get there and back. Dark to light. They were waiting for me at the door when I returned.

"We have messages for you," one of the aliens said, slapping pseudopods and tentacles all about the hallway.

"From God?" I said.

"No," the tentacle slapping grew more vigorous.

"Was it Jesus?" I shook my finger, "Because if he wants me to call him just so he can give me more cryptic messages, forget it."

"Not him either," the pseudopods shot in and out of the damned aliens gooey bulk.

"Dammit, just tell me," my voice rose.

"Are you angry man again?" the alien's tentacles hovered between us.

"No," I shouted. "But I can be."

"Be happy man instead," the alien wove tentacles in a calming pattern before me.

"Just give me the damn message," I slapped the tentacles down, finally recognizing the alien as Hummer.

"Okay," Hummer said. "Are you ready to receive?"

"Yes!" my voice rose again and I stepped forward.

"Phred says hello."

"What?" I said.

"I thought you said you were ready?" Hummer withdrew a pair of pseudopods.

"Phred called?" I said. "From Russia?"

"He sent email," Hummer began packing in pseudopods and tentacles.

"He did?"

"Yes," Hummer pulled back more pseudopods. "He thanks you for breaking his writer's block."

"What?"

Pseudopods withdrew at a growing rate. "Are you not receiving well? He said that he thanks you for..."

"I heard you," I yelled. "When did he have writer's block?"

"Apparently all the time he was here. Leaving the hospital must have been very traumatic," tentacles followed the pseudopods in disappearing. "He's sold nine short stories in the last two days."

"Nine?" I sputtered.

"Nine," Hummer confirmed. "He's writing under a pseudonym of course. Hairy Hairysen he said."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, Svetlana may be a thief but we are pretty sure she is accurate in her event relations," Hummer started to turn.

"Svetlana was here?" I started looking around.

"No," Hummer sent a pseudopod eye back to me. "She called."

"Not collect, I hope."

"No," Hummer kept the unblinking eye pseudopod before me. I waited.

I waited some more.

I got tired of waiting. "Well?" I finally said. "Did she have anything else to say?"

Hummer wavered the pseudopod. "She's enjoying your hard drive."

"Good for her," I said as Hummer stalked into the living room.

"Hey," I followed. "How did Phred send email if the computer is down?"

"It's fixed," Monkey Phil said as he sat on the back of the couch eating grapes.

"How could it be fixed?" I said. "The drive was stolen and the insides were gutted."

"A man came to the door and fixed it," Phil said, rubbing a grape against his lips.

"You let a strange man into the house?"

"We did not think he was that strange," Hummer said.

"His name was Bill," Phil said.

"He said the government no longer trusted him and was making him fix computers," Hummer added.

"He had an id card from Microsoft," Phil said.

"He wore glasses," another alien pseudopod shot into the room.

"He was short," more pseudopods came from other directions.

"He was pretty smart," another pseudopod came into view.

"He was here twenty minutes," Hummer said.

"He liked grapes," Phil said.

"Wait, wait," I waved my hands, dizzy from all the directions providing information. "You're telling me Bill Gates came over and fixed my computer?"

The aliens shot pseudopods towards each other and Phil.

"We didn't really get his last name," Phil admitted. "Were we supposed to?"

"This is incredible," I said.

"We could have fixed it in less time," one of the aliens said.

"If we had the parts," another added.

"Right, it's not like you would need an interocetor or anything," a third chimed in.

"Stop this," I shouted. "Just tell me one thing. Is the computer really fixed?"

All the aliens looked at each other. Phil ate grapes.

"Sure," one of the late coming aliens finally said.

"Bill showed us where the banana advertising was too," Phil added. "He knew quite a bit about the web and everything."

"Yes," another alien bulked into view. "He was quite informative."

"And he loved spooze," Hummer added.

"Hey, wait a minute," I finally realized. "Why are all you guys up here?"

Pseudopods shot everywhere.

"What have you done now?" I said. "Did you make more Elvises?"

"No. We have messages for you," Hummer said.

"You already gave me them."

# Absolute Magnitude

"Those were not the messages we had," one of the other damned aliens twisted his pseudopods together.

"Do you like the living room?" one of the aliens said, bulking his heft into the room.

I looked around. "Yeah, who did this?"

"We did," the aliens said in unison. "It's a flavor of spooze that did not quite prove to be satisfactory and we noted it was similar in color to what was here so . . ."

"You covered my living room walls with spooze?" I sputtered.

"Well, yes," Hummer said. "It's quite stain resistant when dry."

"But, but," I insisted. "You guys will be sucking it off the first time you get really hungry."

"Not possible," one of the aliens said.

"Why not?" my gaze shot from pseudopod to tentacle to bulky quivering alien. I got dizzy.

"Ah yes," Hummer said. "The messages."

"What messages?" I yelled.

"It is time for us to leave," one of the aliens said.

"Where to this time?" I tried to place the voice with the pseudopod. "Utah for deli meat trapping? Delaware for pasta stalking?"

"We're going home," Hummer said.

"What?"

"We're leaving," two of the aliens said together.

"We're done here," another added.

"Finished," a third pitched in.

"You had a twenty year mission," I noted. "How can you be done in less than two?"

The damned aliens shifted their pseudopods and tentacles all about.

"Just because we're an advanced culture doesn't mean we don't, on occasion, surprise even ourselves," Hummer said.

"Wait," I shifted nervously. "What about Elvis?"

"We dropped him off at the Mall of America," One of the aliens said.

"It seemed to meet all of his stated requirements for food items," Hummer said.

"But he's unstable," I put in. "There's bound to be trouble."

"He appears no less stable than many of the individuals we saw there," one of the aliens said. "He fit in pretty well."

"Okay, so the midwest can be like that," I admitted. "Still, he's dead."

"Not at the moment," Hummer said.

"Boy, you guys just can't keep doing stuff like that. How many is this now? 15, 16 Elvi? Someone will start noticing." I began to pace amongst them. "And that stuff you did with bears and Andre the Giant. People still think they're seeing Bigfoot."

"It was our mission," one of the aliens said.

"Promise me no more of that," I stopped my pacing.

"We promise," Hummer said.

"Really?"

"Yes," one of the aliens said.

"We are leaving," Hummer noted.

"Really?"

"Yes," another alien said.

"Just like that?"

"Well, no," a different alien said.

"We cleaned the basement," another added.

"We're taking Shakespeare," a third mentioned.

"Emptied the spooze into the compost pit," another said.

"We're taking Ellison too," a new one said.

"Painted the living room," Hummer noted.

"Wait a minute. Back up," I waved my arms for silence. "Did you say Shakespeare and Ellison?"

"Yes," Hummer said. "We figured you would not want us to leave them."

"Besides," Phil said. "Will's been writing trashy romances for Harlequin in their new soft-sex line."

"What?" I sputtered. "You're kidding!"

"No," Phil said. "He's writing under the pseudonym of Jiggles LaRue. He's sold 14 books so far."

"What?" I grabbed my head with my hands. "How long has he been down there?"

The aliens waved tentacles all over.

"Nine months," Hummer finally said.

"And you never told me?"

"You got so upset with the things we did in the basement that we just stopped telling you about most of them," one of the aliens said.

"I got upset when you wanted to convert the furnace into a generic anti-matter disposal," my voice began to rise. "I got upset when you used the oil tank to create new flavors of spooze," I could feel the red creep up my neck. "I got upset when you used the DNA replicator to give goldfish legs and lungs."

"Ah, fish," Hummer said. "You are upset now, aren't you?"

"Yes," I yelled. "You had Shakespeare, one of the greatest writers of all time in my basement and you never told me. The fish you told me about, but not him. And you said Ellison too?"

"Yeah," Phil said, "but he never really wrote much, he just liked to argue with Will and the Elvi."

"And now you're just going to leave?" I turned my gaze to each of them in turn, at least I think I did since it's hard to tell when they all move at once.

"Yes, all the equipment has been loaded into the mothership," one of the aliens pointed out, moving to the door.

"So that's what all that noise was last night," I made the sudden connection. "Boy, Phil and I will really miss you."

"I'm going too," Phil said.

"What?"

"We are taking the Philodendron with us," Hummer said.

"But," I turned to the grape eating monkey, "They keep scooping you guys."

"We have decided that monkeys make not good fusion fuel," one of the aliens said.

"Yeah," I pointed out. "But it took at least two monkeys to prove that."

## Invisible Friends

"We never admitted to scooping Phil you know," one of the damned aliens said.

"There was fur on the edge of the scoop and a banana in the main cabin," I pointed out.

"Coincidence," one of the aliens said.

"Never hold up in interstellar court," another added.

"So you admit to doing it?" I thought I had them trapped in a logic puzzle.

"Time to leave," Hummer said.

"Bye," one of the aliens bulked up in front of me. "Say hello to Phred for us when he calls."

"Yeah, sure," I felt dizzy.

"Bye," another alien wavered before me. "You don't look so good."

"Yeah, I know." The room started spinning.

"Bye," a different alien neared. "We will not forget you. You provided us with more material than even our superior superiors could have imagined."

"Gee, thanks," I turned to watch them leave. I felt numb.

"Of course it's hard to tell how much is transferable to the entire species," one of the aliens said on the way out.

"Well, we can always clone another one on the way home and scoop him when we're done," another one muttered.

"What?" I said, not believe my ears.

"Cry haddock and let loose the fish of Warr," Phil suddenly shouted.

"What?" I said, spinning towards him.

"Bye," one of the aliens approached me. "I'm Warr. So long and don't forget the fish."

"What?"

"Bye," Hummer approached. "Just let them out. Like thoughts they will find their way. We really have enjoyed being with you. You have given us much to ponder. And we," he turned and oozed towards the door, "have left you with much too."

"What?"

"The fish," Phil said swinging from the room. "Don't forget the fish."

I shot outside to the back of the house and the sturdy basement door. I fumbled with the unlatching of it then swung it open. There must have been hundreds of them. Standing there, staring at me, shifting from foot to foot, waiting patiently. They bowed their heads for a moment, then, slowly, they began to sidle out, single file, one after the other in all their tiny orange glory. A few feet beyond the door they began to separate, moving in different directions. I could do nothing but stare. Minutes later they were all gone. I heard the rush of air caused by the departing mothership and, more numb than ever, made my way back inside. As I sank into a chair I heard the car pull into the driveway. The dog was home. She would be sorry she did not have a chance to say good-bye. On the other hand she was never really that fond of the aliens to begin with so maybe she would be just glad. It's hard to tell with dogs sometimes.



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# Contributors Page

**Allen Steele** has been published in every major science fiction magazine. He's won two Hugo Awards and has eight novels and three short story collections to his credit.

**John Deakins** is a retired science teacher. He has one novel, from Roc, to his credit: *Barrow*.

**Dominic Emile Harman** is a British artist who has just begun breaking into the U.S. market. His work has appeared in *Interzone* and *SF Age*. This is his sixth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*. His cover for issue number twelve of *Absolute Magnitude* won best cover for 1999 in the Tangent website readers award.

**Mike Jones** is an associate editor for *Absolute Magnitude* and does reviews for the Green Man web page.

**Michael A. Burstein** won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1997. He has been nominated for three Hugo Awards, the Nebula Award, and the Sturgeon Award. He is also the Secretary for the SFWA. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

**Geoffrey A. Landis** has won both a Hugo Award and a Nebula Award for his short stories. His first novel has just been released from Tor books. He is a scientist with the Ohio Aerospace Institute and worked on the Pathfinder mission. This is his third appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

**Steve Sawicki** writes reviews for *Dreams of Decadence*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Scavengers Newsletter*, and *Science Fiction Chronicle*. This is his first fiction piece in *Absolute*

*Magnitude*.

**Chris Bunch** has written twenty three novels. He is best known for his Last Legion series available from Roc books. This is his fifth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

**Matthew Rotundo** workshoped this story at Odyssey. One of the people who read the story was Warren Lapine who suggested some revisions and then purchased the story. This is Matt's first professional sale.

**George Barr**'s art work has appeared in *Fantastic Stories*, *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales*, and *Amazing*. He is one of the most experienced illustrators in genre fiction. He has also had short fiction published in *Pulphouse*, *MZB Fantasy Magazine*, and *Weird Tales*. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

*Continued from front cover*

and driving is a felony. Had Bush been convicted of a felony not only would he not have been able to run for the presidency, but Texas law would not allow him to be the Texas governor. I think that's the kind of perspective we needed. Now let's move to the night of the election. All of the networks called Florida for Gore early in the night. Why? Because of the exit polls showed Gore the winner. I happen to think the exit polls were correct. People were asked as they left the polls who they'd voted for. They answered honestly and told reporters who they thought they'd voted for. But rather than focus on this, the news media focused on how flawed exit polls are. I might have believed that MSNBC and CNN really felt this way except that they both plan to continue doing exit polls exactly the way they were done in this election. Once again the television media had two slants to chose from and they took the one most favorable to Bush. They certainly didn't want to have the American people believe that the majority of Floridians had meant to vote for Gore. And then there was the coverage of the recount. I continually heard about how unprecedented it was for a candidate to ask for recounts in a presidential election. Of course this is not true. There have been a number of recounts in our presidential history. What was unprecedented was a candidate attempting to stop recounts, and that issue was never covered or brought to the fore. I'm still amazed that more Americans were not outraged by the scene outside of the Miami Dade courthouse: all those angry middle-class white guys banging on the door to the counting room intimidating the canvassing board into stopping their recount. Had this happened in a foreign election that the

U.S. was monitoring we very well might have refused to certify the results. That's something that almost no television reporters mentioned. I also would like to have seen more coverage of just how the Supreme Court's ruling, which essentially trampled all over Florida's state rights, was at odds with everything that this Supreme Court has traditionally stood for. While you may have heard some of the arguments that I've just enumerated, you always heard them from a partisan panelist and not from a journalist. The American viewing public tends to dismiss what politicians say and believe what reporters tell them. Both CNN and MSNBC were very careful to make sure that their reporters seldom if ever agreed with Gore's positions. The number of times that I heard their reporters tell me things that I know were untrue was troubling, indeed. *Hardball With Chris Matthews* is probably the best example of this. The way the show is set up is that it starts out with Matthews interviewing one Democratic and one Republican operative. Once he's done getting the "spin" from both sides he then moves to his panel of "journalists." Here's where it gets interesting. Matthews does a fair job of making it look like the panel is split down the middle between conservatives and liberals. However, if you check up on his panelists you'll find out that they're all conservatives. They manage to disguise this fact by flashing things like "ex-Democratic pollster" under a panelist name. Sure the panelist was employed once by a Democrat, but he's been politically active as a Republican for years. This is misleading, dishonest, and ultimately hurtful to the American political process. So what the American people hear when listening to the "journalist" on this show is the Republican line

disguised as nonpartisan truth.

Ultimately, how else do you explain why the American public just elected one of the most inexperienced presidents in history, a president that sixty percent of the American people don't share political views with? Now the Republicans would like to change the law that doesn't allow a company to own a television station and a newspaper in the same market. That would lead to more big business control of the news. Not only would big business control the television airwaves, but they'd buy up one newspaper after another. From where I stand, that could benefit only big business, and frankly that scares me. I don't want to live in a country where all of our news is filtered through the lens of people who have a stake in how that news is perceived. To me, this is very akin to George Orwell's *1984*, only, as it turns out, it's not the government, but big business that will be in control. To stop this we need campaign finance reform to stop the infiltration of money into the American political process and tougher laws dealing with the media to protect the American public from the big business interest. We cannot allow this to continue, not if we want a country where a vote means something. This should not be an ideological fight. Whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, this should horrify you. Perhaps this time your candidate won, perhaps this time your views coincided with big business'. But what about next time when they don't?

